

ALSO BY VINCENT P SCULLY  
*GRAPESHOT AND DEMONS*

WHITE HOT GRAPE



VINCENT P SCULLY

*This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people is pure coincidence.  
My deepest thanks to Captains Pellew, Cochrane, Hornblower, Aubrey,  
and most importantly, Captain Alan Lewrie, who shows that a  
Napoleonic-era captain can rid the seas of the king's enemies and still  
be a bit of a rakehell.*

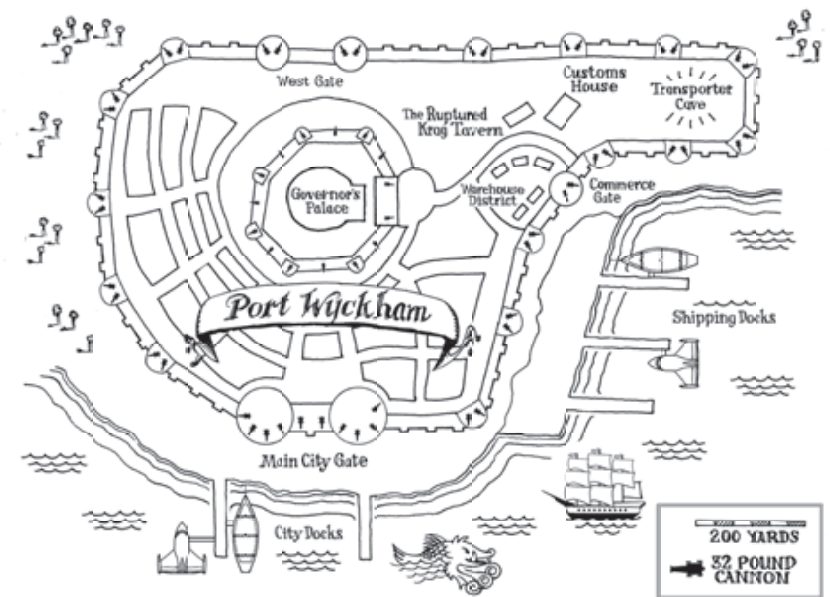
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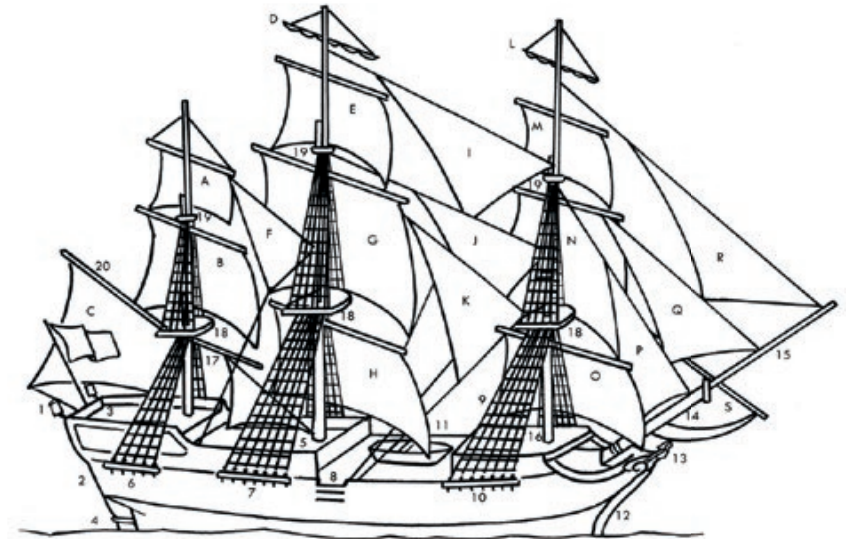
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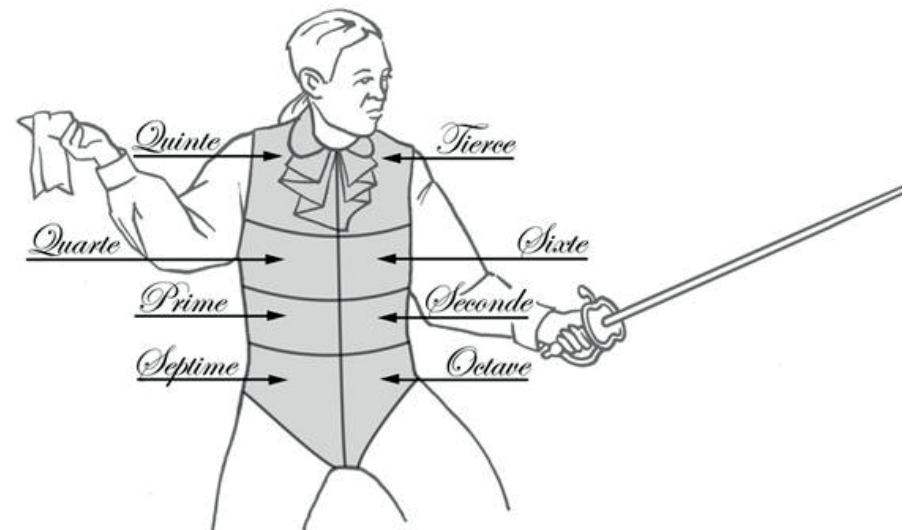




- |                                 |                                 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| A. Mizzen Topgallant            | K. Main Topmost Staysail        |
| B. Mizzen Topsail               | L. Fore Royal                   |
| C. Spanker                      | M. Fore Topgallant              |
| D. Main Royal                   | N. Fore Topsail                 |
| E. Main Topgallant              | O. Fore Course                  |
| F. Mizzen T'gallant Staysail    | P. Fore Topmost Staysail        |
| G. Main Topsail                 | Q. Inner Jib                    |
| H. Main Course                  | R. Outer Flying Jib             |
| I. Main T'gallant Staysail      | S. Spritsail                    |
| J. Middle Staysail              |                                 |
| 1. Taffrail & Lanterns          | 11. Waist                       |
| 2. Stern & Quarter-galleries    | 12. Gripe & Cutwater            |
| 3. Poop Deck/Great Cabins Under | 13. Figurehead & Beakhead Rail  |
| 4. Rudder & Transom Post        | 14. Bow Sprit                   |
| 5. Quarterdeck                  | 15. Jib Boom                    |
| 6. Mizzen Chains & Stays        | 16. Foc's'le & Anchor Cat-heads |
| 7. Main Chains & Stays          | 17. Cro'jack Yard               |
| 8. Boarding Battens/Entry Port  | 18. Top Platforms               |
| 9. Shrouds & Ratlines           | 19. Cross-Trees                 |
| 10. Fore Chains & Stays         | 20. Spanker Gaff                |

L'Académie d'Escrime de Paris  
1807 Fencing Manual  
English Translation

**Valid Target Areas of the Body**



L'Académie d'Escrime de Paris

1807 Fencing Manual

English Translation

**Parries**

**Prime (first position)**

Lower right, palm down, tip down, cross body

**Seconde (second position)**

Lower left, palm down, tip down, straight out

**Tierce (third position)**

Upper left, palm down, tip up, straight out

**Quarte (fourth position)**

Upper right, palm down, tip up, cross body

**Quinte (fifth position)**

Upper right, palm down, tip down, cross body

**Sixte (sixth position)**

Upper left, palm up, tip up, straight out

**Septime (seventh position)**

Lower right, palm up, tip down, cross body

**Octave (eighth position)**

Lower left, palm up, tip up, straight out

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**Glossary of Fencing Terms**

**Attack.** An extension of the point to threaten a valid target area.

**Balestra.** A forward jump that starts with the attacker pushing off the back leg as if lunging, but ends with the rear leg recovered forward to replace the attacker in the on-guard position.

**Compound attack.** An attack with feints to different lines.

**Corps à corps.** The act of two fencers coming together in bodily contact, at which time the director will halt the action.

**Coupe.** An attack that first lifts the blade over the opponent's blade and then returns to a line of attack.

**Disengage.** Dropping the point to avoid a parry or to change the line of attack.

**Double.** An attack that makes a complete circle around the opponent's blade.

**Feint.** An offensive movement to provoke a reaction to open a line of attack.

**Invitation.** Intentionally opening a line for the opponent to attack.

**Lines.** The eight numbered valid target areas of the body.

**Lunge.** An attack using the back foot to push the attacker forward to land in a stretch, with the rear leg extending straight back and the front knee directly over the front foot.

**On guard.** The neutral stance of the fencer from which offensive or defensive actions can be taken.

**Parry.** A defensive movement of the blade to deflect an attack.

**Passé.** An attack that passes the target without hitting.

**Riposte.** A counterattack after a successful parry.

**Salute.** A gesture of respect to one's opponent at the beginning of a bout, performed by extending the point toward the opponent, kissing the guard, then finishing with a downward cut.

**Take the blade.** A controlling press on the opponent's blade.

**Touch.** The declaration of a valid hit.



Ships' Personnel

*HMS Righteous*

Captain Rodney Wyckham  
First Lieutenant Pierce Rawlins  
Gunner Peter Crawford

*HMS Vesuvius*

Captain Winston Randolph

*HMS Scamp*

Captain Martin Hamilton

*Leviathan*

Capitaine Jean Badoin

*Nuestra Senoras de la Trinidad*

Admiral Charles Pierre de la  
Villeneuve  
Fleet Capitaine Louis Touffet

*Cornelie*

Admiral Sir William Jarvis



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# 1

## ON THE WALLS OF PORT WYCKHAM

Post Captain Rodney Wyckham ascended the last set of stairs and emerged into the bright sunlight from the planet's two suns atop Port Wyckham's main city gate. Already, preparations were well underway for the morning's planned exercises. Gun crews from HMS *Righteous* were preparing to fire the gate bastion's four 32-pounders, some of the sixty-three guns that had been salvaged from HMS *Zeus*, the flagship that had sunk during the final battle for the planet. His allies, the League of Worlds, had brought in a group of some strange octopus-like creatures that had been able to swim down and attach lines to the guns submerged in Hollow Mountain's lake after the battle there. Cranes aboard the frigate *Righteous*, 38 guns, and the big French ship of the line *Leviathan* 80 guns, had raised the three-tonne cannons and put them on barges. From there they had been towed back to the city, raised up onto the city walls, and sited to cover the cove and surrounding forest. Port Wyckham was now a well-armed city.

Both of those ships and the bomb ketch HMS *Hedgehog* were half a cable below, tied up at one of the three wooden quays that had been constructed along the shoreline. The morning sunlight had lit up the three ships, their newly painted britework sparkling with fiery light. *If only they could see this back in Portsmouth*, Wyckham mused. It had turned out that gold was actually common on this planet, and the sailors had used it to paint all the railings, the scrollwork, the bowsprits, the rows of gunports, and anything else they felt like highlighting. Naturally, the French ship's captain, Jean Badoin, had gone completely overboard with the gold paint on his *Leviathan*, making the big warship look more like a canopy bed in Louis XIV's boudoir. Wyckham had once marveled at the doge's royal barge in Venice, but it was a Thames barge hauling night soil in comparison to what Badoin had done with his ship.

From the wooden quays, a short beach lay in front of the stone walls that now surrounded the city. Though the horrible flesh-eating Draesh had lost control of the planet to Wyckham and the League, hundreds of the monstrous giants were still living in primitive conditions in the surrounding forests, so high walls were a necessity. They had been built with square-cut stones to a height of over seventy feet, too high for the Draesh to ascend. The entire curtain wall had gone up in less than two months thanks to the large alien ants, which could carry heavy stonework all day without fatigue. The gate tower he was standing on, straddling the main city gate, was almost two hundred feet high, giving its four guns command of the entire cove. While the city fortifications had no ravelins, tenailles, or other modern constructions, its medieval layout was strong enough for defense against the planet's remaining Draesh, or any other enemy without weapons. And if any aliens did succeed in outwitting the measures against weapons smuggling and were able to bring their magical beam weapons or exploding rockets onto the planet, nothing Wyckham could build would stand for long anyway, no matter how many modern defensive structures the city's fortifications had.

Within the city walls was a hodgepodge of hastily erected commercial buildings, most of them constructed of rippled metal sheets, laid out along meandering cobblestone streets. Dominating the city

was his governor's palace, a large stone complex built on a rise in the city's center. Wyckham loved the way the massive structure's white stone columns and gilded dome lit up with the dawn. It resembled a medieval castle's keep, with its own walls, six defensive towers, a heavily defended gate, and a surrounding dry moat. But unlike an ancient keep, it had four batteries of thirty-two-pounders sited to cover the open area around it. He held his gaze on the extensive building complex for a moment. The city had needed a fortified refuge of last resort, and Wyckham had certainly made an impressive one. As the manager of a whole planet, Wyckham needed a suitable government residence for receiving visiting dignitaries, didn't he? Letting some merchant or mining interest build a larger building just wouldn't do. Every British colony had an imposing capitol building to impress the locals, and Port Wyckham had its version. Whether in a colony on Earth with its indigenous natives or here on Freeport with its dizzying array of strange aliens, nothing gave you an advantage with trade negotiations like holding them in a grand palace.

Above the three sailing ships tied to the quays were over a dozen alien space craft, all different sizes and shapes, just floating in the air like the new hot-air balloons over Paris. Other alien ships were afloat in the water, unloading at the quays or moored just off them. During the months since the victory over the Draesh, Port Wyckham had become a major trading and tourist center for aliens from many distant planetary systems. With the magical transportation portal that the Draesh had built, merchant ships could arrive from distant systems in moments instead of years. The portal device could even connect instantly with parallel universes, making commerce practical with many distant worlds with which it had previously been impossible.

Why travel to these parallel universes was so difficult puzzled Wyckham. Shouldn't it be easier to travel to a place that was all lined up parallel with you? But he would be the first to acknowledge his failure to understand the advanced physics that seemed such common knowledge among so many alien races.

So all sorts of strange beings were coming to commercially exploit the newly freed planet. There was a large warehouse district inside the

city walls for conducting trade, as well as growing mining and farming operations outside the city. And all the workers and intergalactic tourists regularly filled the fantastic taverns inside the city walls that the Fireflies and other aliens had established. Port Wyckham's resident population was now over eight thousand, with another three thousand visitors at any one time. Many of the visitors from distant worlds had told Wyckham that his city was the fastest-growing port they knew. The British captain felt like a duke or marquis as he proudly surveyed the thriving port city, over which the victorious League of Worlds had made him master. With his position of power and his visceral hatred for the Draesh, he had even changed the name of the planet from Draez to Freeport.

Even though there had been no hostilities for seven months now, since the defeat of the giant Draesh, Wyckham was uncomfortable with the low levels of powder and shot left in his stores after the final battle at Hollow Mountain. He expected that one of the metals available on the planet would suffice for making shot, and he had some of the human-sized alien ants making molds and testing production of ball, grapeshot, and canister. But while there was abundant gold available on Freeport, there was no saltpetre to make gunpowder. There was none in the ground to mine, and even the planet's bizarre wildlife had none of it in their feces. He'd asked some of the various alien merchants that were bringing in bulk goods to ship in some saltpetre. But the race of Slicks that ran the League of Worlds had banned the importation of even the components of weapons or munitions to the newly designated planet of peace. That those stoic, arrogant Slicks expected him to keep order on the planet without powder for his guns angered Wyckham whenever he thought about it.

Hopefully, today's testing would find a substitute for the gunpowder his cannon needed. Four barrels of different explosive substances had been dug up from the local forests and staged behind the guns by the ever-industrious ants. His first lieutenant, Pierce Rawlins, was walking about the battery, supervising the making of cartridges. Several of the crab-like Krag were packing cartridge bags with various amounts of the candidates to be tested. Wyckham hoped that one of the muddy

compounds would work well enough so they could at least start firing salutes again. Currently, when new alien ships came to the planet or the brig *Scamp* returned from a visit to Earth, that time-honored Royal Navy tradition of greeting visitors had to be neglected due to the lack of powder. And that just wouldn't do.

But his doubts of success increased as he saw the Krag arguing among themselves over the task at hand. Their foreman, a particularly large and ugly creature, was clicking loudly in his strange tongue and shoving his workers rudely about. While Wyckham didn't know how the stupid creatures could ruin today's tests, he suspected they'd find a way.

After the planet had been won, thousands of the four-foot-tall Krag, creatures that the Draesh had brought to the planet as workers, were left without a way to feed themselves. The leader of the Fireflies, the energy beings that provided intelligence for the League of Worlds, had pointed out that Krag were basically land crabs and could not live on this marshy planet without assistance. So Wyckham had decided to take them in and put them to work as well. While not particularly intelligent, they were obedient and could perform most menial tasks with their grasping claws.

The Krag foreman was getting increasingly frustrated with one of his workers. The little crabman was having difficulty stuffing a cartridge bag with some malodorous black slime and had spilled some on the floor. Suddenly the overseer grabbed the worker with his powerful claws, ripped one of his legs off, and threw it over the back wall! *Well, that was a bit extreme!* Wyckham knew that Krag could regrow severed limbs, but still, this was rather rough discipline for the minor offense the worker had committed.

Somewhat at a loss for words, he turned to Rawlins to see his old friend's eyebrows raised in consternation as well. "Ah, now that was a mite harsh, what?" Rawlins commented. "Makes our meanest bosun seem like a nun tending the wounded. I shall have a word with this big crab boss afterward. Perhaps we should proclaim a ban on dismemberment during work details? Won't get much work for weeks from any crabman missing an arm."

“As usual, your quick mind presents solutions that are both productive and based in British decency,” responded Wyckham with a smile and a nod. “Might I also suggest we distribute rope starters to all Krag foremen and instruct them in the usage of that proven Royal Navy device?” Starters were lengths of knotted rope that bosuns would use to prompt laggardly sailors to get “started” on their tasks. “I’ll warrant a good whack on a crab’s arse will be just as motivating as those upon a sailor’s. Definitely superior to ripping off appendages.”

Rawlins nodded agreement as they watched several of the large red scavenger gulls that populated the shores of this aquatic world launch from their posts lounging on the walls, following the crab leg down as they squawked and squabbled over the tasty treat. Krag meat was quite delectable; many sailors from *Righteous* had objected to helping the beasts survive since they made only marginal servants but excellent dinner. Wyckham himself missed the crabmeat dipped in wolf world butter that he used to dine on before he decided to save the remaining Krag from starving to death. He had been persuaded to stop eating them when the leader of the Fireflies, in the form of his childhood sweetheart Lady Brashton, asked him to adopt the silly little creatures. The fact that they had discussed the issue while in bed aboard *Righteous* had made denying her particularly difficult.

Now there were sounds of more commotion from down below where the claw had fallen. The two officers walked to the parapet and looked down to see one of the formidable mud creatures blasting away in his flatulent voice at the aggressive birds. The big gulls were noisily flapping about his market stall looking for the severed claw, causing considerable destruction to the alien shopkeeper’s stock and fixtures.

As in medieval English towns, vendors here had built little shops along the city walls to trade all sorts of goods. This mud creature was trading the very popular aphrodisiac sticks that many of the British seamen used when visiting the local taverns. His tables had been overturned by the meddlesome gulls, with much of his inventory strewn in pieces over the ground. The angry six-foot-wide ball of mud, now out for revenge, rolled over a bird and absorbed it into its center, to God knows what fate. That prompted the three other birds to change

their minds about the importance of the claw and fly off to look for breakfast elsewhere.

“Yas...well...ah...matters down there appear to have settled themselves; no need for us to get involved,” opined Rawlins.

“Ummm...no, no, certainly no need at all,” replied Wyckham as they both drew back from the wall before the mud creature caught sight of them. Wyckham did make a mental note to reimburse the mudman for the losses that the gunpowder experiments had just caused him.

Because it definitely paid to keep these nearly indestructible creatures on your side. Mudmen were employed in the many taverns, such as his favourite, the Ruptured Krag, to keep order. They had already saved Wyckham from several attacks by drunken aliens trying to teach the British captain a thing or two with their fangs, tails, claws, or a handy drinking stein.

*Righteous*’s new gunner’s mate, Fellows, approached from across the bastion and knuckled his forehead in salute. “Gunner Crawford’s respects, sor, an’ ’ee wishes t’ say that th’ guns ’r ready t’ fire, sor.”

“Thank you, Mister Fellows. My compliments to Gunner Crawford, and he may begin firing.”

Fellows scooted back across the bastion to Gunner Crawford, a big, redheaded cockney who had been aboard *Righteous* for years. Having fought valiantly in the struggle to take the planet, Crawford had been rewarded with promotion to sailing master, the most important of all *Righteous*’s warrants. But his future in ship navigation had come into question when it turned out he was illiterate and couldn’t read a chart, much less make one. However, he was the ship’s best gun captain, and he had settled easily into the rank of *Righteous*’s gunner.

Wyckham and his lieutenant remained a good distance away, having been warned by Lady Brashton that the compounds being tested were not well understood and could do anything. Six-man gun crews from *Righteous* had the four big cannons loaded and ready to test. The guns had been run out until the muzzles of the nine-foot gun barrels protruded through the wall’s crenellations, their motion halted when their square wooden trucks bumped up against the stone walls. After

aiming the guns down the empty beach south of the city, the gun captains stepped back from their guns with firing lanyards in their hands, awaiting Crawford's signal.

Crawford nodded to the nearest gun, and its captain yanked his line. The firelock's hammer struck the frizzen, priming powder flashed, and...nothing. Wyckham and Rawlins shook their heads slightly, hoping for something at least from the second gun. It too was fired, but all they got was a long whistling sound from the touchhole that sounded like a firework on Guy Fawkes Day. The third gun actually did produce a low thump in its barrel, followed by a rolling sound as the six-inch roundshot slowly rolled out of the muzzle and dropped straight to the beach below them with a thud.

Rawlins tried to make light of the results. "Well, well, a solution to the problem of our guns being unable to completely depress. Now we can fire on any attackers at the foot of the walls."

Wyckham did not see any humour in the situation. *Christ, I guess the next time I need to hit a foe with a thirty-two-pound ball, I'll just have to throw it at him.* Disgusted, he turned to leave as the fourth gun was fired.

A pure white flame erupted thirty feet from the gun's muzzle without a wisp of smoke, its huge retort crisp and deafening. Wyckham had never heard a gun's discharge anywhere near as loud. His hat was blown off as the gun's breech exploded with blinding light. Since the barrel had been depressed to shoot down the beach, the recoil pushed the entire cannon upward, sending it three feet into the air and back into its restraining cables. The stout cables held, but the long gun barrel broke free to go over the back wall, spinning like a windmill blade in a gale. When it landed, the crash of the three-tunne cannon barrel shook the entire tower.

Both Wyckham and Rawlins were blast-shocked and a bit disoriented. They raised their eyebrows in silence, both men for the moment at a loss for words. "Well now...that one should suffice," a stunned Rawlins finally managed to get through his gums. Wyckham flapped his eyebrows to get his wits back, a Hindu trick he'd learned from a yoga master in Calcutta.

With their faculties slowly returning, the two officers managed to walk over to the parapet's edge to see where the gun barrel had

landed. And damned if it hadn't struck the same mud creature spot-on, completely obliterating the big alien, blowing bits of his body all over the inside of the city wall. For a moment, all was quiet except for the sounds of the hot gun barrel sizzling and steaming in a big mud puddle. Yet within just moments, the alien started to reform itself, all of its muddy bits moving away from the gun barrel and promptly reassembling into an apparently healthy mudman.

Without a doubt, the reassembled alien was quite beside itself with the goings-on, as the two officers quickly learned when the speaking horn for its translator device emerged from inside the creature. A tirade of the strongest curses began in the English that it had learned from doing business with British sailors. While Wyckham and Rawlins were certainly familiar with the blasphemy common to sailors in the Royal Navy, this string of profanity shocked them.

"Bloody fookin' 'ell!" it rasped through the translator. "Firs' ye fookin' wankers oop there cause th' guddam birds t'bugger oop me shoppe, then ye drop 'iss giant burnin' 'ot turd on me 'ed t' boot! By God ye mos' 'av right grand arses to shite this big! Maybe ye needs yer arseholes stretched a mite more?" The diatribe prompted both Wyckham and Rawlins to step back from the wall, again hoping the thing hadn't seen them. "'Ooever's oop there," it continued, "oye be coomin' oop right now t' straighten things oot! Mebbe oy'l drop a big turd on yer fookin' oogly faces, see 'ow's ye like it wif a great big shite shoved down yer t'roats! N' mebbe I'll booger yer soddin' fat arses as well!" And with that, it started rolling to head up the tower stairs.

Wyckham again raised his eyebrows and turned to Rawlins. "Pierce, old boy, mayhap it's time for a glass at the Krag to discuss the day's tests? Certainly no reason to stay here any longer now that we've discovered the replacement for powder, hey?" Not to mention that the Krag was always a safe retreat, thanks to its own Mudmen. "Give my compliments to Gunner Crawford, and might he join us as well? May I suggest right quick?"

With that, he picked up his bicorn hat and walked briskly to the stairway opposite the one the furious mudball was heading up, as Rawlins calmly suggested to Crawford that he run for his life.



2

## AN AFTERNOON GLASS AT THE RUPTURED KRAG

“So that will be all, Mister Crawford. My compliments on a very successful day.”

Gunner Crawford nodded, downed the last of his mug, and headed out the door of the tavern. The Ruptured Krag, identified by the painted wooden sign out front depicting a hostile crabman getting bayoneted in the groin, was Wyckham’s favourite. He leaned back into his magical chair, which greeted him by contorting itself to fit his body. His special table, on a raised dais to give him a view of the entire officers’ room, was surrounded by six of these electrically powered chairs, which were used to dampen the effects of acceleration aboard alien spacecraft.

Wulfe, the lupine alien from the wolf planet Lycan, whose timely arrival at the Battle of Hollow Mountain had saved Wyckham’s life, had brought lots of them in to furnish a tavern he was opening right across from the Krag. Its name translated to the Friendly Den, with a wooden sign outside depicting two drooling canines sniffing each



other's posteriors. Wolf beings, with a warrior culture much like that of ancient Sparta's, were prone to buggery. It was the one tavern in the city that Wyckham would not patronize; whenever he even walked by the place, he kept a wide berth.

For the chairs, Wyckham had traded six barrels of the rum that his crewmen had started making from local sugar beets. Barter was the basis for commerce in Port Wyckham. Currency meant banks, and those institutions were something Wyckham wished to avoid having on Freeport. Like soloicitors, bankers were people to avoid.

Over the last few months, the interior of the Krag had been steadily improved. The managing Fireflies had decorated the walls with paintings of various tranquil scenes from the English countryside. The "ladies," as they were referred to, since they often took the form of human women known to the sailors, could also read stored facts in the sailors' minds and had found favourite scenes there, which they had reproduced on canvas. The tavern also had lots of quality wooden furniture made from trees cut down around the port. Wyckham's own table was made of some species that resembled cherry, beautifully lacquered and with its carved aprons depicting life aboard *Righteous*.

But the Fireflies could have saved themselves the trouble of all the decorating, since the vast majority of their clientele cared only about one thing at the Ruptured Krag, and it wasn't the furnishings.. The Fireflies' whole reason for setting up the tavern was for harvesting "life-force," the energy in the millions of spermatozoa that humans discharged during copulation. As long as the Fireflies appeared in the images of beautiful females and begged customers for sexual relations, Human sailors, and aliens too, would keep coming no matter what was on the walls, or whatever the hell they sat on.

The Ruptured Krag did serve another purpose besides the transfer of living seed. While formal commercial treaties were arranged at the governor's palace, the Krag was where most routine business on Freeport was conducted. Located just past the customs house, it was customary for every visitor to the planet to immediately continue on into the tavern. Not only was it renowned throughout the cosmos for

the quality of its fare and its other "attractions," it was where newly arrived merchant captains heard about goods for trade and opportunities in the newly opened distant worlds.

Every time Wyckham was there, it seemed there were new creatures that he had never seen before. Besides the usual bizarre residents of Port Wyckham, today there was a pair of large spiders. They were large, about seven feet tall, with four eyes on their heads and perfectly spaced hairs along their legs and bodies. They were waving bolts of silk around and shouting offers through their translators in English, the common language of trade in Port Wyckham. "Genuine bark spider silk, straight from Arachnus, stronger than any metal, no order too large!" Stronger than metal? Wyckham would have to pick up some of the stuff and see what it could be used for. Though he damn sure would not trade any living being to these slimy-looking buggers.

The spider kept talking like a carnival barker. "Trade for insect larvae or any tender beings you want to get rid of." A group of ants came in the door, moving briskly in typical all-business mode, passing right in front to the two arachnid hawkers. The larger spider diddled his legs across the floor, and was suddenly in front of the lead ant.

"How about you, mum? One of your young ones here causing you trouble? I'll take him off your hands, and you'll have three bolts of this silk to boot—just think of the things you could build with it!"

The lead ant, apparently a queen out with her court, acted as if the spider was beneath her consideration and just kept going across the room, her churning legs catching two of the spider's and dragging him along with her, all the time spewing out insults from her translator device. "Hungry? Go eat your mate. If I were buried in Draesh turds and you wanted them, I still wouldn't do business with you."

Just another friendly encounter between species at the Krag. Wyckham actually wished the spiders would go over to the Krag's small stage and devour the band of stickmen there producing the horrible racket they believed was music. They were striking the floor, furniture, and even one another in some sort of staccato rhythm, producing a floor-shaking clamor that was disrupting Wyckham's digestion. He

returned his attention to the issues at hand, trying to ignore his topsyturvy bowels.

The three officers had spent the afternoon at Wyckham's official table working out more detailed tests for the smelly black ooze that had been used in the fourth gun. They would beach a ship's boat and use its two-pounder bow gun for the tests. Firing tests would begin with a one-ounce charge, then increase by one ounce at a time. They had to start with small amounts of the stuff; it was clearly very powerful. Firing would continue until the gun reached the range for a bow gun using British fine-milled gunpowder. The amount used in the last test would then be the maximum charge for a two-pound gun; any more could burst the breech. Based on that, they'd come up with standard charges for the bigger guns in the squadron and on the city walls.

From what he had witnessed, Wyckham guessed that this new explosive had somewhere near ten times the force of British fine-milled gunpowder, so his great guns could at most handle around one pound of the new charge. Wyckham wondered if some way could be found to use this new munition to increase the range of British naval guns without damaging them. A shame to have such an incredible explosive but be unable to take advantage of it.

Other matters from the morning's exercise had also been resolved. He had sent a sailor to the mud being's market stall with a gift of distilled water, a gift Lady Brashton had assured him any mudman would love. He hoped the sailor he'd used to deliver the gift would return alive. Three of the British sailors present had been injured in the gun's explosion, hit by hot metal, though his Prussian surgeon Schecter had reported that all would mend. Several Krag that had been milling about too close to the gun were not so fortunate. There would be fresh steamed Krag for the wardroom aboard *Righteous* tonight.

Now an ant whose name translated to Queen's Most Favoured entered the officer's room, saw Wyckham, and walked over. Though about the size of sheep, alien ants were otherwise much like Earth's, red or black in colour, with two twirling antennae, and always running about doing something. This one was high up in his colony and had

been managing the effort to cast new shot for his warships. Wyckham's mood brightened further at the sight of some apparently weighty cloth bags the ant was carrying. Possibly another of his problems had been solved?

He stood and made a leg to greet this important alien. "Mister Favoured, your servant. I must say I'm quite curious about the bag you are carrying. Perhaps we're about to have a little dog-and-pony show?"

The ant's two antennae stopped circling, which with ants indicated their owner was puzzled. Wyckham had to remember not to use the upper-class slang he had grown up with when speaking to translator devices. "Ah, don't concern yourself with my choice of words; they are of no importance. So, my good man, please tell me, how have your efforts to cast shot been proceeding?"

Though the ant had a translator strapped to its head, rather than answering it silently tipped up a cloth sack and dumped its contents on the table. Ants seemed to think communication was a needless exercise; activity was all that counted. A tan-coloured roundshot, obviously meant for a thirty-two-pounder, fell from the bag to the table. But clearly it weighed more than thirty-two pounds, for when it landed, the stout wooden table top split right down the middle with a loud crack, causing the two officers' fresh drinks to slide down into the crevasse.

Wyckham bent down to pick up the ball but struggled somewhat; it took both his hands and all of his strength to raise it. *Jesus, this ball must weigh at least five stone!* "By God, man, what is this material?" he excitedly asked the alien. "Can this ball be easily produced in quantity?"

The ant reached into another bag, pulled out a leather bottle, and dumped some brown liquid on the floor. Finally the ant's translator crackled to life. "Brown lakes underground. Brown water dries quickly. Very hard."

Sure enough, as Wyckham watched, the brown liquid started to sizzle and thicken. In a few moments, the noise stopped, and Wyckham gingerly bent down to examine the now-solid material close up. He waved his hand over it, detecting no heat, and picked up the three-inch solidified puddle. It was already cool and very heavy for its size. Wyckham whacked the thin sheet on the edge of the split table in an

attempt to break it but succeeded only in gouging the wooden tabletop and jarring his hand.

Unbelievable! Some kind of wet clay that had perfect properties for making shot, easily worked and very hard—and there were lakes full of the stuff! But then it hit him—his guns wouldn't take the tremendous stress of propelling such weighty shot. To get a six-inch ball this heavy to fly straight for a mile would require a far larger explosive charge, one that the cast-iron cannon could not tolerate.

"Truly a wondrous material you have brought me, sir, and I must thank you for your industrious efforts," Wyckham stated. "Unfortunately, these balls are too heavy for my guns. To shoot them any distance would require a charge that would be a bit rough on British Naval artillery. Would it be possible to make these balls lighter? Maybe by diluting the liquid some way?"

But the ant was ignoring him, looking behind him at some commotion coming from the officer's door. As a crowd of labouring ants came through that door, Mister Favoured turned back to Wyckham and rasped, "Brown water also makes stronger guns."

The group coming through the door was struggling to carry something, despite the strength that ants possessed. Whatever it was, it was extremely heavy. "Makes stronger guns"? Could it be?

It was. About twenty struggling ants finally made it through the door carrying a ten-foot-long gun barrel, obviously cast in the magical brown liquid. God only knew how much it weighed. Even though one alien ant could hoist twenty stone, this burden was clearly a challenge for the group. The ants were progressing slowly toward them, taking small shuffling steps to make sure their feet were planted for each forward movement. Finally they stopped at some unspoken signal and dropped the gun with a loud clang to the Krag's stone floor. The group then backed off, their heads bobbing in what Wyckham assumed was their version of panting.

The British captain walked over to examine the gun. Though the same length as a standard thirty-two-pound naval gun, it was a lot thinner. While its bore was clearly for the standard six-inch, thirty-two-pound ball, the outer diameter was much smaller. The wall thickness

on the barrel was only around an inch and a half, far less than the six inches of cast iron wall that standard Royal Navy thirty-twos had. It looked ridiculously thin, but possibly this magic brown stuff was strong enough to make a practical, great gun with such a thin casting? It had better, because the ants hadn't cast any reinforcing rings on it—the outside of the gun was smooth over its entire length. The cannon's bulbous breech was thick, about two feet in diameter as opposed to the barrel's nine inches. Maybe it could handle a full charge of the new explosive they had discovered this morning? Good god, the range of such a weapon would be astounding! And loaded with a much heavier ball made of the new material as well? Wyckham again picked up the brown, heavy roundshot. He tried to imagine what would happen to a wooden ship hit with such a weighty ball at the much higher velocity the black ooze would give it. Christ, it would probably go right through any ship afloat. It would probably go through just about anything!

But there were questions to be answered. First and foremost was whether a gun with such a thin casting could handle the necessary charge, though Wyckham suspected that the miracle brown substance was up to the task. And what did the gun actually weigh? Hopefully, its thin casting kept its weight below what was practicable to mount in quantity aboard a ship. *Righteous*, for instance, could handle only about seventy tunnes in armament and still be seaworthy.

"Mister Favourite, you astound me with the extent of your industrial efforts! Would you be so kind as to join me for a glass here at my table...ah..." Wyckham remembered that his table was in splinters. He looked around the room, and something caught his attention. "Well, I think we'll just take this table over here."

Wyckham walked across the tavern's officers' room and bent over the designated table, staring right into the eyes of its two occupants. Very slowly and in a voice low with menace, he asked, "Weren't you vipers just leaving?"

They were two snakemen, Wyckham's least favourite species after the Draesh, sitting there looking absurd in their brocaded vests and brightly coloured sashes. The pair stared straight back into Wyckham's eyes, leaned in close, and then simultaneously flicked out their forked

tongues, stopping less than an inch from his face. Wyckham didn't flinch a muscle but reached down and fingered the grip on his superb Moroccan sword as he leaned even closer to the two reptiles. In a deadly serious tone, he whispered, "I did for your boss, and I'm about to do the same for you two. Just give me a reason. Stick your filthy tongues at me again." The two snakemen remained motionless. Wyckham started sliding his blade from its scabbard.

Though its guard was heavily decorated and bejeweled with small rubies, it was a deadly weapon. It had a slight curve yet was light and fast in the thrust, unlike most curved blades, which were heavy and designed for the cut. The curve allowed Wyckham to thrust or back-cut around a parry, and it was especially handy in close quarters, like right now, where the point was easy to slide upward into an opponent's chin. And Wyckham had superb control of the point, due to the notches for his fingers he'd cut into the front of the grip and a notch for his thumb on the back. It fit his hand like a fine dueling pistol.

The finely tempered blade emitted a slight ringing sound as it was drawn out of its scabbard, audible in the sudden hush that had descended over the usually boisterous tavern. Even the band stopped its racket as every being in the room became aware of the impending violence.

That was it for the snakemen, who were known for choosing discretion over valour. Banned from carrying weapons along with everyone in Port Wyckham except for British officers and provosts, the big snakes had no real option here except defeat. They slowly rose up and slithered off to another table without a word, giving Wyckham the most malevolent stare possible the whole time. But they kept their tongues in their mouths.

Wyckham couldn't give a damn what they thought. He'd been quite ready to run some cold steel through a snakeman. He'd done it before and would have no qualms about doing it again. Months ago, right in the Ruptured Krag, he'd been attacked by their supposed leader, a brute whose name translated to Lightning Fangs. With the assistance of a timely blow from Wulfe, he'd managed to avoid the reptile's spring and run his blade right up through the creature's jaw.

And he wouldn't mind doing that to any other snake that crossed his path. He called the species Highwaysnakes, since they reminded him of England's highwaymen, always hanging around taverns, looking for information about travelers they could rob. Rumours about the port pegged these snakemen as the pirates responsible for the recent disappearance of two League merchant ships. And their recent embracing of Mediterranean corsair clothing angered Wyckham further. That these slimy buggers wanted to dress like human pirates was an affront to any seagoing man. Wyckham often considered arresting them all, but he had no hard evidence of any wrongdoing. Freeport was gaining a reputation throughout the universe as a world that was welcoming and safe for all, which contributed in no small way to its commercial success. He needed solid evidence before he would arrest any visitors.

"Yes, here we are," said Wyckham, turning back to the ant with a welcoming smile. "Please be seated so we can further discuss how to best take advantage of your impressive accomplishments. A glass of sweet tea, perhaps?"

The ant leader's antennae swirled furiously, and the big insect eagerly sat down. On *Scamp's* first return trip from Earth, she had brought back a supply of tea and sugar. Wyckham kept a personal store of it for his personal use at the Krag, and the ants went wild for heavily sweetened tea. Lieutenant Rawlins joined him, and they both sat down.

The background noise of the tavern returned along with, sadly, the mind-numbing din from the band. Wyckham's steward, Thomas Obujimi, walked up from where he'd been standing behind the broken table. A year ago back in Maryland, Wyckham's squadron had freed the educated African, ending his years as a slave managing his owner's plantation. Wyckham had selected him to be his steward after his previous man, Larkin, had perished in the Battle of the Portal. Over the past few months, Wyckham had come to depend on the man's managerial skills, using him as his adjutant to greet alien visitors and arrange trade with new worlds. But while Obujimi was very competent as a valet and in commerc, his snobbish opinions about sailors' ways could be irritating.

“Sir, may I get you and your new guest some fresh drinks?” said the formally dressed and bewigged ex-slave. “Or would you prefer to be served by a tavern wench so you might fornicate here in public as usual?”

*Damned sarcastic valet! The cheek of the man!* Wyckham would have a talk with him later.

Failing to understand the sarcasm, one of the Fireflies nearby stood up in anticipation. It was the one in the image of Catherine the Great, Queen of the Russias, who always seemed to be near Wyckham’s table. She and Wyckham had been intimate once, but he had found her frighteningly aggressive. After Wyckham had put a “leg over,” her animalistic snarling had quickly put him off the moment, and he had avoided her ever since. He responded loudly so she could hear, “Thank you, steward. If you would be so kind, just a mug of sweet tea and a bottle of the north French claret for Mister Rawlins and myself.”

First of all, the three discussed getting the clay gun moved up onto the gate bastion for it to be mounted and tested. The ant had his workers pick the gun back up, and they slowly struggled back out with it. Wyckham called over Midshipman Moore, the young man who had saved Wyckham’s life with his swordplay aboard *Righteous*, and instructed him to run off to the gate bastion and inform Gunner Crawford that another gun was coming up. Then he sent for his carpenter, Jones, to make arrangements for the construction of a gun carriage to fit the smaller gun. Then they could weigh it and begin firing tests with both gunpowder and the new black ooze. Finally, Rawlins and the ant left to manage their new tasks, and Wyckham settled back in his comfortable chair with another glass of claret.

Certainly this had been an encouraging day. Not only had he solved the problem of replenishing his powder and shot, it looked as if they had a new type of cannon that would make all others look like medieval culverins. Hopefully, this new weapon wouldn’t have to be used—thankfully, the planet was at peace. His ships hadn’t fired a gun in months. After a rather busy few days when he first was thrust onto this planet, Obujimi had taken over commercial operations, and Wyckham’s time had mostly been spent relaxing at the Ruptured Krag,

dallying with a selection of gorgeous women conjured up by Fireflies or having interesting chats with astonishing travelers from other worlds. Not a bad life for a sailor.

And he had to admit a certain pride in what he’d done. It had all started seven months ago, when a Firefly agent had entered a Draesh transporter station and aimed it at him, bringing the six ships of his squadron to this planet. These ships had played the key role in conquering the Draesh homeworld and ending their campaign of intergalactic conquest. And he’d been right in the thick of it, personally chopping the Draesh leader into minced meat in the final battle. Hell, compared to this, Nelson’s feats were minor. Rodney Wyckham had saved the entire universe, not just a puny empire on one planet!

But even though his home country would never even hear of his victories, in this planetary system, he was a venerated hero. The League of Nations had even selected Wyckham and his squadron to rule the planet, with a formal ceremony during which delegates from all the League’s planets formally paid homage to him in their different ways. He’d felt like a newly crowned king after the ceremony until a few days later, when Wulfe explained matters over drinks.

“Sorry to shake your throne, your lordship, but know that the League didn’t give you this world out of respect or gratitude or anything altruistic. After Hollow Mountain, the League’s governing committee met and bickered for days over who would get to manage this place. With its transportation portals, its natural resources, and its potential for magnetic mining operations, every power in the League wanted this planet. On only the third day of negotiations, the leader of the Slick galaxy even threatened war with my world over the issue. He quickly reconsidered his position on the matter after the Lycan leader stood up, walked over, and bit one of his arms off.” So politics weren’t much different throughout the universe. Sounded like a typical day back home in Parliament.

“It took a timely proposal from the Fireflies to settle the issue. Giving the planet to the harmless Humans who had helped defeat the dreaded pigs was well received by all the major powers, since everyone felt you were incapable of using the planet’s resources and its transporters for



anything aggressive. And deep down inside, every member was considering the possibility of taking the place at a later, more opportune moment. Certainly with your wind-powered ships made of trees and with your very, ahh...should I say 'basic' weaponry, you certainly couldn't defend this world if a member world decided to take it for itself. So who gets this place has only been postponed. Rest assured that several worlds are plotting to take Freeport right now, just waiting for the right time." That had just been wonderful news. Not only did Wyckham have to worry about giant porcine Draesh living in the local forests, Freeport also had other much better-armed foes to worry about.

But to the alien merchants and traders who did business on Freeport, Wyckham and the Human sailors were gods, having ended the scourge of the Draesh with their simple wooden ships. Many species had even taken to dressing and talking like humans, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. Like the armless Snakemen who dressed like Mediterranean corsairs, in fancy brocaded vests with the armholes empty and brightly coloured sashes holding swords that they couldn't even grasp. Christ, but sometimes matters on this world were just too daft to believe.

Still in a lubricated reverie, Wyckham was contentedly spinning the stem of his glass as a two-foot ball of light came drifting through the door. It hesitated and then came floating over toward Wyckham. The ball stretched out to the floor and became Tracy Brashton, the childhood friend who had spurned his marriage proposal back on Earth. But this was not the real Miss Brashton, only an image taken by the mysterious leader of the energy beings known as Fireflies, balls of electrical energy from a massless universe. They filled a major role in the League of Worlds, providing intelligence and other management services. Wyckham was still trying to fully understand the extent of their powers.

Like their Draesh enemies, Fireflies could gain power by consuming other beings, either physical or pure energy. The continuous contact with Human males, who had huge stores of life energy in their seed, had given her race a vast source of life energy. Apparently, every time a human male had a "happy time," he discharged around thirty

million living spermatozoa, a number comparable to the number of beings in many alien civilizations. Just what was her race doing with all this newly gained power? And before the arrival of men, had her race been consuming entire civilizations as the Draesh did? Were they still doing that somewhere in other galaxies?

But despite these nagging questions, he felt a surge of excitement wash over him as he watched her walk over. No matter that she was only an image, he would always thrill at the sight of the dangling blond curls, the alabaster skin, the penetrating blue eyes. Even the fact that the Firefly practiced Tracy Brashton's calculating social manipulations didn't lessen his ardor. She was seldom in Port Wyckham, instead working inside the mountain power facility built by the Draesh, trying to understand how the big demons had harnessed the planet's magnetic energy. And even though there were plenty of other Fireflies to dally with, he missed the amorous liaisons with the image of his childhood sweetheart.

Wyckham stood, made a leg, and bowed. "My Lady! As always, wonderful to see you! Please sit down and enlighten me on developments in the cosmos. You simply must taste a glass of this, claret brought in from Earth." Well into his cups, boldness was taking the helm. "You'll love it; I know how you appreciate any new 'physical experience.'" *And maybe another wonderful physical pleasure with a certain 'weighty mass' a little later? With a generous gift of 'life-force' for the cause?* But Wyckham noticed the consternation on her phyz and ceased his lewd thoughts. Apparently the energy being had more pressing business than copulation.

She immediately responded, "Of course I would love to spend some time with you, but I must leave soon. I have only just arrived here on this planet to get a warning to you and the other representatives of the League that are here." Wyckham settled back onto his magical chair, trying to sober up. This Firefly being did not raise fears without cause..

"While the League of Worlds has the Draesh contained in several distant systems, there are indications that they are planning a reconquest of Draez. We see their forces assembling in a galaxy nowhere near any potential site for a battle with us, but in a spot that was once

served by a transportation portal. We know that if they get back here and retake this planet, they will be able to tap into this planet's core in a way we still cannot do, giving them back their immense power. We must be sure they never again have a presence here. While the League can keep the enemy fleets distant from this system, you must make sure the portal station here is protected. Be aware of anything unusual. The Draesh may have bribed some of your visitors to wrest control of the station, adjust it to allow in weapons, and bring in their massive fleet."

She turned back into a floating energy ball and started to leave, clearly in a hurry, all business. But she continued communicating, which she could do since her speech was just electrical management of energy in the air and she needed no particular form to talk to humans. "Of course I'm quite sad that I have no time now for fornication. Would you like me at least to send your mind the message for orgasm?"

That caused many nearby sailors to put down their mugs and look over in anticipation of quite a scene developing. "No, ah, no thank you madam," he stated, looking around in embarrassment. "I must decline right now so I can consider your news and take certain actions."

Disappointed sailors returned to their drinks. Wouldn't that have been the talk of every wardroom and tavern in the city? The captain sitting there alone at the tavern, in the throes of orgasm? "My God, did you hear that the captain was seen pleasuring himself in the middle of the Krag? All by himself, apparently uninterested in all the beautiful women there, he'd rather think up some fantasy to excite himself? Now I just wonder what he was thinking about! Mayhap one of those cute six-legged alien sheep with the big derrieres?"

So Wyckham had declined, and she floated off. "Rest assured, I will be increasing the guards in the portal cave," he added. "Godspeed on whatever journey you must now undertake." She could be off to another universe for all he knew.

With the Firefly gone, Wyckham pondered her sobering news. Since the victory over the Draesh at Hollow Mountain seven months ago, the Draesh campaign of intergalactic conquest had stagnated. Without access to the transporters on their homeworld, the Draesh

fleets could no longer instantly transit the barriers between parallel universes. No more sudden flanking maneuvers or surprising appearances deep in League of Worlds systems. Though they still had several powerful fleets that controlled valuable galaxies, they were effectively blockaded and going nowhere new. The League of Worlds had a huge navy, led by the Slicks' very advanced ships, and it was deployed to seal all the principle straits between galaxies, the fast passages that alien travellers referred to as "the dark gates."

Besides the loss of their transport capability, when the Draesh lost the planet, they'd also lost their primary energy source. In a way that the Fireflies had yet to understand, the Draesh had tapped into the immense magnetic field of the planet's core, converting it into power for their weapons and shielding for their ships. They had even been able to send it to their fleets in foreign galaxies, no matter how distant. While the Fireflies had been studying the magnetism mining system ever since the allies had taken Hollow Mountain, they could still not start it.

So if the Draesh retook this world, the military situation could shift back in their favour. Under no circumstance could Wyckham allow that to happen. Who or what in Port Wyckham could be conspiring against him and the planet? He glanced over at the two serpents that had sullenly given up their table. Anyone of their race was certainly suspect. They were only tolerated here because they smuggled in valuable spacecraft fuel, from their home planet that was still occupied by the Draesh. Besides the suspicions of piracy against League shipping, rumours in the local taverns had some snakemen colluding with the big demons themselves. Certainly they would have no moral difficulties working for their own sworn enemy if the pay was sufficient. But before Wyckham would move against them, he needed proof of a conspiracy.

With no immediate solutions about possible infiltration coming to mind, the good feelings from the day's accomplishments returned to his somewhat sodden mind. *Ah, don't worry, Wyckham! Nothing short of a well-equipped army could take this city!* There was no reason to be concerned about a Draesh plot on the city. Port Wyckham was just filled

with alien races carrying grudges from past Draesh depredations. If they heard any rumours, they'd go into a wild state of vengeful blood-lust at the first sign of any collusion with the hated ogres. Mudmen especially hated the big devils, and the dozens of those indestructible beings in Port Wyckham could certainly handle any uprising of Draesh allies, be they snakes or whatever. So there was nothing to worry about. He was not going to let Lady Brashton's fears ruin a grand day like this.

Wyckham settled back, again content with his world. But at times like this, his thoughts often went to the one question that remained unanswered in Port Wyckham. Where was James Harrison, the Yankee privateer who had left Port Wyckham months ago to explore the planet? The man had taken some of his Americans off to colonize the interior, promising to return frequently and report on his discoveries, just like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, the fellow American explorers he idolized. But there had been no word from him for six months now. Wyckham's initial disappointment at his continuing ignorance about the interior lands of the planet had been replaced by his concern for Harrison's welfare. The Yankee privateer had been instrumental in scouting and planning the two victories over the Draesh that had won the planet. Wyckham owed him much and could only hope that the man was faring well.

Then, just as he had finished tipping his glass, he spewed its contents right back out in surprise. Because Captain James Harrison, clad in rugged clothes of fringed animal skins, had just walked through the door and was sauntering over to Wyckham's table, a big grin on his face.



### 3

## NATIVE SHEPHERDS AND ARMOURED CATTLE

Captain Harrison and Lieutenant Barton were crawling through high grass, two officers trying to be Indian scouts like those they had employed back in the Virginia militia and wished they had with them now. But someone had to investigate the sounds and smells that were coming from the meadow up ahead, and they were the best hunters in the bunch. It was especially difficult to crawl along in the mud dragging their six-foot Pennsylvania rifles without wetting the firelocks. But clearly there were some animals ahead, and large grazing ones by the sound of their low but powerful snorting.

Harrison and his American privateer crew had been exploring the planet's interior for months, looking for a place to settle as their own. They had started inland on various rivers in canoes, but all the land near water was too marshy for farming or big game. After they had hiked some fifty miles inland, they finally found a dry forested area that was suitable for colonization. On a hilltop, they constructed a wooden stockade as a base for hunting and further exploring. The two



of them had been gone from the stockade for three days now without finding any game, but clearly that was about to change. Finally they came to the edge of the large meadow and peered through a stand of tall grass.

“Sunuvabeech, will ya lookee thar!” whispered Barton. Because in front of them was a score of some kind of immense, three-horned beasts unlike anything on Earth. The juveniles in the herd were the size of American buffalo, while the largest bulls were as big as a coach-and-four and must have weighed near five tonnes each. Heads the size of cows mounted two long horns above the eyes and a short thick one on the nose. The jaws ended in vicious-looking hooked beaks which were ten times the size of an eagle’s. Covering their thick necks was a flared boney shield about six feet wide. Their short forelegs kept their heads low for grazing, while the man-size rear legs were clearly designed to launch the beasts in a ferocious charge. They dragged along thick reptilian tails to balance their huge hindquarters.

Being experienced hunters, the two explorers had approached the meadow from downwind, so the animals were unaware of their presence and the Americans could peacefully observe the grazing herd. Shooting one was out of the question. Harrison doubted that a rifle ball would do any damage to these hulking creatures, and it might set off a stampede. Both men just watched, dumbstruck by what they were seeing.

Suddenly something changed. First, there were grunts of alarm at the far end of the field as some of the monstrous cattle raised their heads. Then the entire herd spun as one and took off running, right toward them! They were about to be trampled!

“Oh, Jesus!” yelled Harrison. “Stand up! Shoot at the first one!” He doubted they could harm the beast, but possibly they could scare it off. Both men stood, leveled their rifles, and fired at the lead bull, the noisy bursts of flame and smoke momentarily startling it. The beast immediately veered right, heading into the forest to avoid this new loud and frightening threat. The rest of the thundering herd followed, and the two men were safe.

Or maybe not. Because now the two Americans saw the reason for the stampede. Chasing the herd, swinging a good-size tree trunk like

a club, was the creature they most feared on the planet. A thirty-foot-high carnivorous Draesh.

Harrison tensed in fear at the familiar sight—the bulging, bloodshot eyes, the two huge tusks on its lower jaw, the mouth full of dagger-like teeth, the blunt porcine snout, and those demonic pointed ears. He had hoped he would never see one of the evil monsters again. At Hollow Mountain, he’d watched as several of his men were eaten alive, ripped apart and devoured piecemeal by these creatures. Harrison had frequent nightmares about the horrible death there of his best marksman and lifelong friend, one Samuel Harkins. He could never forget the man’s screams for help as one of the creatures pulled his right arm off and slowly chewed the flesh off it, like a man eating a chicken drumstick. The man had called out to Harrison, “James, please, shoot me, James!” and Harrison had fired his last shot, ending Harkins’s pain and degradation.

With its long legs, the huge demon was upon them before the two Americans could move. With a ferocious snarl, it cocked its arm to obliterate them both with one swing of the tree trunk. Harrison’s mind went blank—there was nothing he could do. He’d been around enough sudden death to recognize its undeniable arrival.

But the beast froze in midswing, suddenly looking to its left with sudden panic in its eyes. It dropped the tree and reversed course, running hell-bent back toward the other end of the meadow. To Harrison’s disbelief, the cause of the giant monster’s terror came into view—three diminutive savages at the edge of the field.

A giant Draesh was afraid of some little natives? Hell, they couldn’t be more than four feet tall. But then the cause of the Draesh’s fear became apparent, as each of the little bronze men put a plant tuber to his mouth, and they blew out three balls of roaring flame. The running demon squealed in pain as one missile hit its right shoulder and stuck there, the flames growing. The Draesh swiped at the flames with its left hand as it was running off, but that only managed to set its hand alight as well. Harrison watched as it fled into the woods at the far end of the meadow, squealing just like a wild boar speared in the hunt.

Harrison and Barton frantically reloaded their weapons as the three small savages headed toward them—no telling what was next.

But with their blowpipes at their sides and smiles on their faces, the little men seemed at ease. Harrison relaxed—they seemed curious and pleased to meet a fellow enemy of the Draesh. He examined the three natives as they walked up. They wore jackets and leggings made of animal skins, their long black hair falling over their shoulders. As they got closer, he saw geometric tattoos all over their faces.

Harrison had dealt extensively with several Indian tribes in Virginia and always enjoyed encountering new ones. He raised his free hand to shoulder height in the traditional sign of greeting that both the Iroquois and Powhatan had used. Apparently that was the right thing to do, because the three little men immediately started yelling excitedly and running to Harrison with their hands in the air. They each ran up and slapped Harrison's upheld hand with their own, repeatedly yelling "Hi-yi." Then they stood around laughing and slapping one another's hands some more.

Finally, both parties went through the act of formally introducing themselves, always important when encountering new tribes. Harrison pointed to himself and said his full name, and soon he had them mouthing a respectable "Jam-eez-arreeson." Each of the three savages then pointed at himself and mouthed his name in a growling guttural language that Harrison couldn't mimic, but he smiled and nodded enthusiastically anyway.

All the protocol taken care of, the young leader of the Indians pointed to Harrison's Pennsylvania rifle with an inquisitive look. The Yankee captain pointed one finger in the air in the common sign for "wait a moment" and looked about for a suitable target. He ignored a beautiful yellow bird perched on a nearby limb; for all he knew, it was the sacred bird of the tribe he'd stumbled upon. Instead, he focused on a small rock sitting on top of a large boulder, about twenty paces away in the center of the meadow. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, put the hammer at full cock, squinted down the barrel, and squeezed the trigger. The hammer hit the frizzen, the priming powder flashed, sparks bounced off his closed eyelids, and the gun fired, shattering the small rock. Then he handed the rifle to the small fellow, who acknowledged the loan with a big smile and gracious nodding.

After allowing the little warrior a few minutes to explore the weapon's firelock and trigger, Harrison pointed to the blowpipe this native was carrying, apparently the stalk of some tall plant. What was this small weapon that could spout fire and terrify a Draesh? The little man grinned and nodded, reaching into two leather pouches he had strapped to his waist. From the first he pulled out a handful of green clay, which he squeezed into a ball and inserted into one end of the hollow tube. Then with his other hand he pulled a small amount of cinnamon-coloured powder out of the second pouch and put it into his mouth. He put the end of the stalk in his mouth, took a deep breath that bulged out his cheeks, and blew loudly into the end.

With a flaming roar, a ball of fire flew out of his weapon, crossed the field, and hit the yellow bird that Harrison had passed over. So much for his theory of sacred birds.. The unfortunate creature fell from its perch, the fire on it growing as it hit the ground. Harrison walked over to see that the flames had stuck to the poor animal like glue. They quickly burned through the charred corpse and set aflame the wet grass underneath as well. And even from ten feet away, the heat was intense. After a few minutes, the flames went out, and the American captain was able to approach the hole burned in the ground and peer into it. He could make out some roots still burning at least six feet down. Shaking his head in wonder, an impressed Harrison walked back to Barton and their new allies. Communicating with the young leader with signs, Harrison was able to figure out that that the brown powder was a catalyst that, when mixed in the blowpipe, set the green material on fire.

For the next few days, the two groups got to know each other. First, the natives took them to their village, a group of about thirty wood huts in a small valley, where they were introduced to their leader and given a king's welcome with a two-hour feast. Some kind of six-legged goat was slaughtered, sliced into steaks, and cooked on skewers over a fire and served with nuts and vegetables. Much to the Americans' delight, cups of a fermented berry drink were passed around, and by dawn, they were all lifelong friends.

After four days, it was the Americans' turn for hospitality. Harrison and Barton took a party of natives, including the son of the tribe's

leader, back to their stockade housing the rest of the American explorers. There another banquet was arranged, with freshwater fish, American whiskey, and that world-famous delicacy, hardtack. The rock-hard naval ration delighted their new friends; apparently they had never tasted any kind of bread. And unlike the Americans, they saw no reason to bang the hardened rolls on the table to knock out the weevils; they were just a delicious addition like little berries in a rich Danish pastry.

Harrison was able to persuade the leader's son to stay for a few more days. The young man was quickly picking up on Harrison's sign language, and the American had so many questions to ask him. Barton dutifully volunteered to escort the rest of the visitors back to their village, his sense of diplomacy probably spurred on by thoughts of the tiny but attractive females back there who had constantly followed the tall lieutenant around.

Over the following week, Harrison and the young Indian prince, named Draeshpalone, in their language "draesh eater", spent entire days together and grew closer. Communication became easier as the savage showed a remarkable grasp of language and started to pick up English. He was able to recount the central story of his tribe and its defeat by the Draesh eons ago, which had pushed his people away from the lush coastline into the dry interior. Every member of the tribe dreamed of the day when they could return to their ancestral homelands along the oceans. But for hundreds of years now, they had tended their giant cattle in the dry highlands while the Draesh along the coasts reveled in devouring the foreign beings their transporters brought in.

The young Indian was delighted to find out that a third race, Humans, had arrived in force on the planet and defeated his hated enemies. He listened intently to Harrison's every detail of the battle inside the Draesh mountain fortress, which explained the recent movement of the giant demons into his tribe's territory, living in local forests, and poaching its cattle. But he certainly wasn't angry with Harrison and the Humans for pushing the monsters inland; on the contrary, he was delighted with the tale of the bloody Draesh defeat.

Harrison invited Draeshpalone to travel back with him to visit Port Wyckham and meet the Captain, Rodney Wyckham, the leader of the victorious Humans. He assured the young man that he could persuade Wyckham to grant his tribe the right to return to the coastline and settle wherever they wanted. In return, Harrison asked for a supply of the chemicals to produce flaming balls, pledging that they would only be used for fighting the Draesh.

Ecstatic that the tribe might move back to the coastline, the young man persuaded the tribe to agree to reveal the location of the two valleys where the mines for green incendiary material and cinnamon catalyst were located. He took Harrison to the two locations with five of the Americans to dig out a supply of each, making sure they kept the two chemicals well separated. They filled dozens of large leather bags and hung them on the backs of several of the giant bison for transport. Two days later, he and Draeshpalone were on their way back to Port Wyckham.

While working in the valleys, neither Harrison nor Draeshpalone ever noticed the giant bloodshot eyes peering at them from the forest.



4

## GREEK FIRE FOR THE ROYAL NAVY

“So here they are,” said the tall Yankee captain, placing two small pouches three feet apart on the table. “You can examine them separately, but Jesus Christ, do not mix them. Even the smallest amount of the brown powder sets the green stuff afire, and you wouldn’t be able to put it out before this whole tavern was burned down.”

Wyckham opened the two pouches, one at a time, and examined the two simple-looking materials. The green clay was quite heavy, some sort of metal ore, while the brown powder looked just like dirt.

The Royal Navy had always wanted some way to fire red-hot shot. Over the past two centuries, French shore fortifications had employed it regularly, and heated shot had set many British ships aflame. But with the obvious risks of ovens for heating shot aboard wooden ships, not to mention the danger of handling red-hot cannonballs on tarred gun decks, no ships could use it. Now these two compounds would change all that. Wyckham could see his squadron soon equipped with shot that could rapidly incinerate any enemy ship!

He looked Harrison right in the eye. "By God, man, you've answered every sailor's dream—Greek fire to shoot at ships without burning up your own! We'll cast roundshot in the green material, mix a pinch of the brown material with our powder, and there it is—one hellishly hot naval munition," gloated Wyckham. "No ship could stand for a moment against such a missile." Five hundred years ago, the Byzantine Empire had possessed the secret of Greek fire, some kind of incendiary that could be shot from the bows of boats to turn enemy ships into cinders. Now he had it—a much more powerful version.

"Well, that ain't the half of it," replied Harrison. "Let's take a walk. There is something else I should show you."

Puzzled, Wyckham stood and followed the American out the door. Harrison led him over to the base of one of the stone towers flanking the city's gate. He stopped about twenty feet from a stairway, pulled out his Richards and Company pistol, and extended it at the waist-high stone railing that ran up the stairway.

Wyckham had an idea of what was about to happen and gingerly moved back a few steps. Harrison cocked the weapon, aimed, and fired. Sure enough, a flaming ball flew out and hit the wall. To Wyckham's amazement, a charred smoking hole about three inches wide appeared immediately in the stonework. The damned stuff had burned right through a foot of stone quicker than you could blink an eye! The ball had continued and imbedded itself into the tower's foundation, still burning away.

"The Draesh are afraid of just a pinch getting blown out of a stalk at 'em," stated Harrison. "Just imagine what this small pistol charge would do to one. Burn a hole right through the big pig, and probably his mates behind him as well."

Wyckham went over and examined the tower, smoke still pouring from the hole that the fireball had made. Jesus, the shot had burned two feet into the tower's stone foundation after going through a foot-thick stone wall!

This was an incredible find for the British squadron. Armed with this updated Greek fire, a single man with a pistol could have the same destructive power as a six-man crew with a naval great gun.

"Well, by God, sir, you've certainly impressed me!" exclaimed Wyckham. "Where can we get more of this stuff?"

"Right outside the city gates," replied Harrison. "Your guards wouldn't let me through the gate with it. Come take a look and see if you can put in a good word for me."

Which of his men hadn't let the well-known American into Port Wyckham, keeping a valuable discovery away from him, the governor? Some damned stickler for detail would get a severe dressing-down from Wyckham. Every man in the city had to know Harrison, a hero of Hollow Mountain and one of the few allowed to carry arms about the port. Wyckham was surprised and angered that a city sentry could act so foolishly.

He was about to apologize to Harrison for whoever had been so obstinate when he walked through the open gates and stopped dead in amazement. Because before him were several immense beasts, clearly the armoured bison Harrison had described. Each one had two large leather bags strapped to its back.

In hours of discussions in the Krag with visiting aliens, Wyckham had frequently heard of animals like this, said to have populated all planets at one time in their pasts. He'd heard tales of giant reptilian monsters that had ruled before the arrival of more sentient beings. Some of them long-necked herbivores that lived in large herds, others that were ferocious upright predators that stood as tall as houses with vicious yard-long teeth and tiny front legs. And one of the most common of the legendary animals was this one—the large, bison-like, three-horned creature with a bony head shield, supposedly capable of defending itself from the large predators. Now, a living testimony to the truth of these legends stood right before him. Wyckham wondered if Earth had ever had such creatures.

A small, brown-skinned human, some kind of primitive, was tending the snorting animals, feeding them by hand from a bag of grain. At Harrison's suggestion, the tanned native walked over with a friendly smile on its tattooed face. "This is Draeshpalone," stated Harrison. "He's a prince of a tribe called the Garoshen, which means Cattlemen. He's quite intelligent and has actually picked up pretty good English during the days traveling here."

Whereas Wyckham would have ignored any savage he encountered back on Earth, he had learned that important beings could be in any shape here on Draesh, and he formally introduced himself. “Post Captain Rodney Wyckham, British Royal Navy, of His Majesty’s frigate *Righteous*, at your service,” he said, making a leg and bowing.

To Wyckham’s amazement, the little savage did the same! “Prince Draeshpalone of the Garoshen, your servant sir,” he said with a grin in passable English, bowing and making as good a leg as any noble at court.

Harrison was beside himself with laughter. “Well done, Draeshpalone, well done! Like a British fop in a London shop!” Turning to Wyckham, he said, “Jest had to get him ready for meeting British royalty like you, Captain. Hope it reminds you of back home. You must miss all your British pomp and circumstance out here in your crude colony.”

Wyckham had to chuckle. Back on Earth, Harrison had hated Britain and everything it stood for. As an American privateer, he had taken nine British ships from 1812 to 1814 before *Righteous* had caught up with him in Chesapeake Bay. But he and Wyckham had developed mutual respect for each other during their travails here on Draesh, where Harrison and his captured crew had played key parts in the fighting. Wyckham slapped the Yankee on the back with congratulations for a well-orchestrated jest.

But this shipment was no laughing matter. It was damned important. “My good man, this is fantastic. How much of this Greek fire have you brought us?” asked Wyckham.

“I dunno,” replied Harrison. “Maybe two tunnes? We loaded these fellows up with all they could carry after leaving room for the two of us.”

“Good God, man, you rode this beast here?” gasped an astonished Wyckham.

“Yes, not a bad ride, either,” answered Harrison. “Though in a canter; it’s not quite an Appaloosa. Bounced my arse around pretty good when it took off after a wild hog. Must’ve thought it was a Draesh young’un.”

Wyckham didn’t know how many cartridges two tunnes would make for his six-inch naval guns, but it had to be in the hundreds. He called the marine sergeant commanding the gate watch over to him and made arrangements for the freight to be unloaded and carefully stored in separate warehouses along the quays. With Harrison signing to Draeshpalone, he also arranged for the giant animals to be moved to a livestock pen and cared for. Then he proposed they all head back to the Ruptured Krag for a celebratory dinner. Harrison would certainly welcome a decent feed after months of eating in the wild. And God knows he deserved a banquet for such an important achievement.

Truly an excellent day! Wyckham’s ships would soon have the ability to shoot heavier balls and flaming shot for miles! With all the possibilities for developing powerful new armaments, the future of Freeport looked extremely promising.



5

## HELL'S TRIUMVIRATE COMES A' CALLING

A week later, Wyckham was once again atop the city's gate bastion, along with a handpicked gun crew and most of his officers, this time to watch the testing of the new gun that the ants had cast.

Below them, along the walls, were almost a thousand of the city's residents, including Fireflies, ants, mud beings, Slicks, a few of the silent stick creatures, some ten-foot-tall lizard-men, and even two living vines twirling about, all of them jockeying about for the best viewing position.

Word had also spread through many planetary systems about the latest human technology being shown off on Freeport today, and hundreds of new visitors had come to watch the event as well. Even his old friend Wulfe, the wolf being who had played such a major role in the Battle of Hollow Mountain, had brought a delegation into town from Lycan, his homeworld, just to see all the goings-on. Why they had all come puzzled Wyckham. The weapons on display today were silly antiques compared to the immensely powerful rockets and beam



weapons common on many alien ships. But an intergalactic mystique had developed around the heroic Humans who had gotten their arms past the Draesh transport sensors and conquered the planet, and many alien beings had to come to Freeport just to see the latest Human weapons.

As a result, there were many creatures present that Wyckham had never seen before. There were stone beings made up of geometrical forms, such as cubes, pyramids, and spheres, walking about on cone-shaped legs. There was a delegation from some rodent world, made up of beings resembling the strange marsupials of New South Wales he'd heard about, with heads like bears and bills like ducks. . There was also a group of gentle skunk-men who walked upright and were covered in beautiful, soft fur. Despite the crowds, this last group seemed to have a viewing area all to themselves.

There was also a grouping of fish-people, their heads similar to those of large albacore, covered in scales and walking on split tailfins. Among them was what seemed to be a school of upper-class juveniles, out with their tutors. While Wyckham thought he was used to odd aliens, that acceptance was challenged when the fish chaperones started serving lunch to their hungry young charges. The adults thrust their scaly arms into leather sacks and came out with tiny human beings, living ones! They were naked, hairy little things, some kind of miniature savages. The poor little people squeaked in terror as they were thrown through the air to the waiting fish children, their cries suddenly silenced as they were snapped out of the air by lunging fish mouths! *Good God!* Wyckham had to turn away and cover his ears. *Forget about it, Wyckham! God knows you've eaten plenty of fish!* But the rule of turnabout being fair play was very hard to accept right now.

Dozens of enterprising aliens were hawking various merchandise to the assembled throng. Mudmen were doing their usual brisk business selling aphrodisiac sticks, and newly arrived merchants were bartering trinkets and strange foods for whatever items the audience had to trade. And, of course, many Fireflies had taken the opportunity to float about and offer their companionship to any species that could pay in "units of living energy".

Wyckham watched the interaction of a glowing Firefly with a creature that looked like the offspring of some kind of humanoid and a Russian sturgeon, complete with all the ugly tentacles on her face. After some kind of haggling, the Firefly turned from a glowing ball into another brightly coloured sturgeon-being, which then made a long dance with bizarre flapping movements. After a couple of minutes, the watching fish woman went wide-eyed and shot a stream of black eggs onto the ground. The Firefly returned to energy form and immediately absorbed every dollop of the spilled caviar. Didn't even need biscuits to spread it on. Wyckham shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts of the repulsive undertones of what he had just witnessed.

The four iron guns in the tower battery had been moved aside to test the new clay gun with the gunpowder replacement, the heavier shot, and the Greek fire. Hopefully they would be able to fire off an impressive salute for HMS *Scamp*, which was scheduled to return from Earth today. Wyckham could see the mile-long line of the square transit portals that had been opened about three miles west, floating a few feet above the surface, with seawater cascading out in short waterfalls. Each of the holes was about three hundred feet square, making an easy target for *Scamp* to find and enter from the other side back on Earth.

This would be *Scamp's* third return trip from Earth. The first one had occurred about two months after the League's victory at Hollow Mountain, when about two hundred of the seriously wounded had been nursed back to health by the miraculous abilities and devices of the Slick surgeons. Eighty-three of them had asked to return permanently to Earth, mostly those with immediate families. But some other hands, several of them good sailors Wyckham didn't want to lose, wanted to just go back for a few weeks, mainly to drop off gold for destitute relatives. Not wanting to put in to Portsmouth harbour and be detained by a curious and unpredictable Admiralty, *Scamp* had gone back and dropped them off in its cutter a few miles out of Portsmouth, with a return trip to pick them up scheduled for three weeks later.

While there, *Scamp's* crewmen had visited their favourite grog shops and spread tales of the second new world they'd discovered, one with plentiful gold in its forest streams and wonderful taverns in its fantastic



city. After losing crewmen from battle and returns to Earth, Wyckham had needed replacements, and he'd instructed his returning crewmen to do their best to bring back some more experienced hands. The tales they told of the goings-on at the Ruptured Krag turned out to be more than any sailor could resist. When the brig returned to Draesh from its second trip, she returned with not only her old hands but with dozens of rated sailors eager to sign up with Captain Prize Bounty Wyckham, the captain who made his crews rich with prize money. And not only had *Scamp* brought back the experienced sailors he needed most, but also cases of French wine, American whiskey, and Virginia tobacco, supplies that were almost as important. So a month ago when some hands asked for another Earth leave, Wyckham had agreed and sent *Scamp* back a third time.

*Scamp* would be greeted by two of the other ships in the squadron as well. *Righteous* and *Vesuvius*, both under the command of their first lieutenants, had weighed anchor and sailed out near the portals, just in case the returning brig needed assistance after dropping back into the waters on Freeport. While the sea was calm here in the cove, the seas could be up in the English Channel, which would raise *Scamp* up on a wave on the other side of the portal and throw her roughly through the transit hole. Months ago, when the squadron initially arrived on Draez, HMS *Zeus* came through sideways and breached, swamping the ship and losing over a dozen men to drowning and loose guns flying about. Hopefully today's arrival would be a gentle one, and *Righteous* and *Vesuvius* would only have to fire salutes.

While the ship's carpenter, Jones, had been building a carriage for the new gun over the last three days, tests were performed on the new black explosive using a normal cast-iron gun and roundshot. After hours of firing off a gun with steadily increasing amounts of the black ooze, Crawford had determined that the new explosive was exactly 10.3 times more powerful than traditional gunpowder. A twelve-ounce charge of the stuff was just as powerful as a standard eight-pound charge of normal gunpowder. Today they would find out how large a charge of black ooze the new clay gun could handle. If it could handle a few pounds of it, who knows how far its range could be? Possibly five miles, or even more!

Crawford had also run tests on the Greek fire. *Righteous's* gunner had first cast six-inch balls of the fiery green clay and made paper-wrapped cartridges of the brown powder mixed with the black ooze. He'd found that the flaming clay worked well in a thirty-two-pounder, without damaging the gun barrel and staying in a ball as it flew toward the target. He had even found that rolling two-inch balls of the Greek fire in black powder kept them separate when fired, so the flaming balls covered a large area like a load of iron grapeshot. With over fifty of these balls in one load, enemy ships or combustible fortifications could be quickly destroyed.

Jones, making a final inspection of the new gun carriage, was checking the mounting of the orange clay cannon. Apparently satisfied, he walked over to Wyckham to report. "Cap'm, she shows no cracks, sittin' square, axels 'r straight 'z a forestay, all ship-shape fer firin'."

"Thank you, Mister Jones," replied Wyckham. "Smartly done, as usual." Turning toward Crawford, he officially got matters underway. "Gunner, she's all yours."

All the officers and men present stepped behind a short wooden wall that had been erected some fifty feet off. The charges would be steadily increased as the tests proceeded, and there was a chance the gun would explode. Hopefully minor cracks would appear and warn them before too much explosive caused a catastrophic rupture, but prudence demanded caution here and the wall had been erected to protect observers.

A gun crew of volunteer sailors stepped forward and loaded the gun with a small, paper-wrapped cartridge of the new black ooze, wadding, and a 32 pound iron ball. Then they too backed away to leave Crawford siting the cannon with a handspike. Though typically a gun crew's captain would aim and fire a gun, Crawford had insisted on firing this weapon himself.

Finally he too was satisfied and backed off, a twenty-foot-long lanyard in his hand, and crouched behind one of the tower's cast-iron 32's. With a firm yank, the priming powder flashed off, and an instant later, the gun fired. Again there was a huge crash, a jet of white flame, and no smoke. But this time, with a much smaller charge, the gun

didn't blow off its breech, and rolled gently back into its restraining ropes.

Everyone stood to see the fall of shot. A wooden panel the size of a cottage had been erected as a target about a thousand yards down the beach, bearing some unknown artist's rendition of an alarmed Draesh. About two seconds after the gun fired, the Draesh's left eye disappeared in a shower of splinters. Damned if Crawford's first shot hadn't been perfect!

The crowd was delighted to see the caricature of their hated foe with a hole in its head and erupted in approval. The aliens cheered, applauded, or just laughed, each in its own peculiar way. Mudmen were blasting away in their flatulent language, octopi were bobbing on their eight arms and snapping their beaks, the fish people were slapping one another with their fins, ants clicked and spun their antennae, Wulfe and his fellow wolfmen howled, and even the usually stoic Slicks hummed notes loudly in their musical language. Even the blind gorillas were grunting and beating their chests. Though they couldn't see a thing, they used their empty eye sockets as ear horns, funneling all sounds and vibrations right into their brains, and understood exactly what had happened. Wyckham couldn't help but smile at all the bizarre jubilation.

Crawford was certainly pleased. "By gar, she shoots 'z straight 'z me pecker at a game 'n th' Krag!" he exclaimed.

"That will be enough of that, Mister Crawford!" bellowed Wyckham, trying to appear infuriated. Though he was having difficulty suppressing a chuckle, he would have to talk with the man later. Royal Navy discipline had kept things orderly on this planet so far, and he especially couldn't have a new warrant officer breaking the rules prohibiting coarse language right in front of the men. Especially since Crawford had referred to the wild seed-shooting game the hands played with the Fireflies in the tavern, a shocking pastime that made Wyckham uncomfortable whenever he thought about it.

Copper sheepishly muttered, "Yessor, sorry, sor," as he and the gun crew prepared the gun for its next shot. Young Captain Randolph of *Vesuvius* was on the docks below, away from the crowds, measuring out

precise quantities of the black ooze with one of the scales his ship used in firing its two thirteen-inch mortars. When each cartridge was safely sealed, either a loblolly boy or a Krag brought it on up to the tower. Over the next half hour, the gun was fired off with increasing amounts of explosive. Each discharge of the new gun was louder and more violent than the last; soon the gun was leaping backward like a racehorse leaving the gate, crashing into its restraining ropes with each shot. After running out of beach, the gun had been turned seaward, and the shot splashes were now at least three miles out, twice the range of a 32 pounder using gunpowder.

Wyckham and the crowd of bystanders were increasingly impressed, their applause growing along with each louder explosion. British and French officers were exclaiming aloud. "Good Lord, that one might have hit Whitehall!" and "Eet eez almos' as loud as zee Anglais weemen's moans when I make zee love to them."

There was clearly a special comraderie brewing among these beings, Wyckham realized. Despite its wildly divergent population, the city was developing a soul. And Wyckham felt the bond, too. Like him, they were all sailors far from home.

Gunner Crawford was constantly inspecting the gun for cracks or any sign of fatigue, but the magic material showed no signs of failure. Most remarkably, it was still cool to the touch. A cast-iron gun would be almost red hot after a dozen shots. This clay material must be extremely dense.

Wyckham was elated. There was no point in further tests with roundshot, since their splashes were getting too far out to see. Time to give the crowd a real thrill. "Mister Crawford, well done! Now I believe it's now time for the Greek fire. Let's show our city and its esteemed visitors the flaming shot you've developed."

The gunner nodded assent and barked out some orders, and soon loblolly boys were scampering up from below with green balls of the Greek fire and the cartridges combining black ooze and the brown catalyst. But behind them came some Krag, also ferrying the new charges up to the bastion. Wyckham wasn't sure he was comfortable with the bumbling crabmen carrying such volatile materials. He was about to

say something to Crawford when a cry went up from Midshipman Moore, perched twenty feet above on a viewing platform. “Ahoy the deck,” he yelled out. “Brig *Scamp* coming through, south southwest!”

Everyone turned to see the small brig make a graceful slide through the nearest portal to bob gently in the cove’s calm waters. The successful conclusion of a safe voyage was always an event to be celebrated. Time for a proper welcome home.

“Mister Randolph!” he called down to *Vesuvius*’s captain, who was watching from the ramparts below. “It seems we now have plenty of this new gunpowder, so let’s use up the old. I’ll have eight guns to welcome Commander Hamilton back to the port, if you would.” It would be much safer for the salute to be fired by the guns on the lower wall, away from the ongoing experiments on the gate tower. Finally the Royal Navy tradition of saluting ships entering harbour would be properly performed again.

But an alarmed call from Midshipman Moore shattered the festive air and easygoing mood of the crowd. “Ahoy the deck! Signal from *Scamp*—enemy in sight!”

Enemy in sight? Where? Quickly Wyckham looked about as some of the officers present snapped out their telescopes. He scanned the skies but saw none of the dreaded Draesh spacecraft. If this was one of Commander Hamilton’s poor excuses for humor, he would assemble a court martial and have the man cashiered out and sent back to Earth.

But unfortunately, it was no joke. Looking back toward *Scamp*, he saw what could only be a French ship of the line slide through a different portal about three miles off, making a sizeable splash when it struck the surface and rocking violently. No sooner had it settled in the new waters when what looked like a French frigate came through another portal to the first ship’s starboard. That was followed by another big liner on its port side, then three more ships of the line, all together, one of them extremely large, splashing down through the neighbouring portals.

And if all that weren’t amazing enough, the six ships flew the white-and-gold banner of the royal House of Bourbon, supposedly a British ally. But just to remove any uncertainty as to their intentions,

gunports opened on all six ships, and hundreds of gun muzzles ominously poked out. Wyckham doubted the effort was intended for saluting the port.

Christ Almighty, the goddamned frogs were here in overwhelming force! Hell, this squadron in front of him must have almost 500 guns, 3,500 sailors, and 600 marines. Port Wyckham would be taken, and then, God alone knew what the stinking crapauds had in store for the city.

And every officer in the French fleet would be looking to capture Rodney Wyckham, the hated marauder who had conducted so many raids along France’s northern coast. The mad Corsican Napoleon himself would heap rewards on the captain who took Prize Bounty Wyckham captive. Christ, they’d take him back and parade him all over Paris. His perfect life was about to be replaced by one of imprisonment and humiliation. Or maybe just ended quickly on a guillotine.

*Blast it all, Wyckham, get some spine!* he told himself. *You’ve already given up? Fight the bastards!* First thing to do was to save his ships.

“Mister Moore! Signal to *Righteous* and *Vesuvius*! Enemy to windward and make for port!” He needed to get the two ships under the protective guns of the port’s fortifications and concentrate the city’s defense. But the two ships had been beating across the cove’s mouth, farther out than the approaching enemy. They would not get to the city before the French.

The city’s batteries would just have to hold them off. But Wyckham turned to see his officers and warrants frozen in panicked indecision, not jumping to their duty. He tensed up in anger, about to bellow at them to get moving, when he stopped himself. *Calm down, Wyckham.* Faced with such an overwhelming force, every officer in any army would assume that surrender was the only option, and his officers were just awaiting his order to capitulate. But damned if Wyckham was going to surrender his planet to the damn frogs. Wyckham opened his mouth to tell his officers that the forces of Freeport would fight. *But don’t let them know that you’re damned terrified, too.*

“Lieutenant Rawlins, it seems that once again we have a visit from our frog friends. Perhaps we should prepare some entertainment? Please be so good as to grab whomever you may and man the guns

on the walls to the south of the gate. Captain Randolph,” he yelled down to the ramparts below, “that is a French squadron approaching. The north wall is yours.” With its excellent view of the entire cove, Wyckham himself would command the battle from the gate bastion.

With most sailors and ship’s personnel out in the cove aboard *Righteous* and *Vesuvius*, it would be the city militia that would have to defend the city. To be prepared for possible attacks when the squadron was at sea, Wyckham had established a militia to man the city’s defenses. Now it would be put to the test. Ants, Slicks, and the blind ape-like species used in cargo handling had all been trained in gunnery and small arms, but none of them had actually fired anything in battle. Certainly their rate of fire would be slow. And like any green troops, they might not stand once the battle got hot.

Wyckham needed to get them encouraged and moving to their assigned stations. Almost every being in town had come out to watch the day’s weapons testing. He stepped back to where all the various beings along the wall could see him.

“Citizens of Freeport!” He held his arms open in appeal. “We are under attack by a race of horrible, evil beings from my home planet, known as the French. If they beat us, they will take everything on the entire planet and ruin what we’ve built here. But fortunately, they make weak soldiers due to their consumption of all sorts of strange foods.” (That got a smirk from Lieutenant Rawlins). “So just get to your guns, follow your officers’ orders, and fight as you’ve been trained, and we’ll send the whole lot running back to Earth, crying for their mothers like the weak little babies they are.”

With bizarre cheering in all their strange tongues, the assorted aliens of the city militia got moving and were soon running to their assigned guns. To Wyckham’s relief, they were babbling excitedly and calling out to fellow visiting aliens to come along and join the fight as well. How long this motley collection of creatures would stand was still a question, but for now, the militia’s morale was good and it was itching for a fight.

Where else could he get help in this crisis? The Firefly Lady Brashton! He could use the intelligence agent right now; she always seemed to

come up with some brilliant ploy whenever catastrophe loomed. But all the glowing balls that had been present minutes ago seemed to have fled the field for some reason. No help from her today. *Damn!*

Wyckham looked at the only other source of trained gun crews, the *Leviathan*, tied up at a quay below. This was a French ship of the line that was supposedly under his command. But all that had changed moments ago, when the first French ship dropped through the portal. No way could her French captain fire on his fellow sailors just to save a bunch of filthy *Anglaise*. Sure enough, Capitaine Jean Badoin was already aboard, standing idly on her quarterdeck, looking up at Wyckham, when he should have been clearing his deck for action. After a moment, he simply shrugged at Wyckham and turned to the railings to watch the French fleet’s progress. *Hummph! He’s definitely sitting this one out.* Wyckham couldn’t blame the man; he’d probably do the same in Badoin’s place.

He looked back to see the French ships forming line, with the frigate hanging back. Midshipman Moore, still up on the lookout tower, had his glass out. He hailed Wyckham.

“Sir, French ships are *Pluton*, 74; *Scipione*, 74; *Neptune*, 80; *Indomptable*, 80; the frigate *Cornelie*, 40; and...sir, the last ship is *Nuestra Senora de la Santisima Trinidad*, 136 guns.”

The *Trinidad* still sailed? Wyckham knew the other five ships had survived Trafalgar, but the biggest of the lot had supposedly foundered on a lee shore after the battle. Apparently she had been hauled off the rocks and repaired, because here she was, gunports open on all three decks, about four miles out, and trailing in a line of ships heading straight toward him.

All the ships were moving methodically into position, reducing canvas to just topsails and working jibs, slowing down for attack. *Neptune* was in the van, followed by *Pluton*, *Scipione*, *Indomptable*, and the *Trinidad*, with the frigate *Cornelie* in a screening position slightly south of the squadron. When the five ships of the line got within a half mile, they’d turn their line parallel to the shore and start leveling Port Wyckham. With five hundred guns against only the forty-three that Port Wyckham had mounted on its seaward walls, the issue wouldn’t take long to be decided.

Then he realized that straight in front of him sat possible salvation—a forty-fourth gun, the amazing one they had just tested, which could shoot three miles. Christ, the French were almost in range of this thing right now! And even though hits from one gun shooting roundshot wouldn't stop this attack, a few well-placed Greek fireballs just might! One hit with this deadly fire on a wooden ship should take it out of action within minutes. *Thought taking Port Wyckham would be a Sunday pic-nique, did they?* Well, the goddamned frog-eaters were in for a bit of a surprise.

"Mister Crawford! Be so good as to load this gun with one of the fireballs and a charge same as our last shot. I think the buggers are almost in range right now. Shall we give them a very warm welcome?"

Crawford was already at the gun. "'Twas me thinkin' 'zackly, sor," he agreed as he placed a black ooze cartridge in the muzzle, which a crewman immediately rammed home. Crawford then threw in a handful of the brown powder and some cotton wadding, and another crewman dropped in a six-inch ball of the fiery green clay. The rammer again pushed it all home as Crawford went back to the breech and readied the firelock. He peered down the gun's muzzle, jerked the gun with a handspike just a mite to the left, then licked a finger and held it up for a final measure of the wind. With one last adjustment with the handspike, the gun was sited, and he leaped aside to yank the lanyard.

The gun fired with the same ferocious explosion that the last test shot had produced, spitting white flame out about twenty feet and leaping back into its ropes. But this time, there was also an additional roar as a large, flaming ball flew out, leaving an orange smear and a white smoke trail in the air. The three of them watched the white-hot shot head toward the *Neptune* in the van.

The trail of smoke veered and missed the lead ship, hitting the water about two hundred yards to its left and one hundred yards past it. At this distance not a bad first shot. Crawford tapped the quoin in a bit as two other British sailors ran up to help work the gun more quickly.

Another call came down from Moore on lookout. "Sir, there are Draesh on the French ships. All six of them." *What?* Wyckham snapped his own glass out in disbelief. Even at this distance, he could make

out two of them on *Neptune*'s quarterdeck, strutting about like god-damned officers!

With Britain almost constantly at war with France, he'd always disliked everything about the French, but now his hatred knew no bounds. The sodding frogs were in league with the Draesh, the most vicious fiends in the universe! And that explained the hasty exit of the Fireflies, who were terrified of the mental powers that the Draesh could use against them.

Well, Wyckham would do his best to roast them all. Scanning the human French officers on the *Neptune*'s quarterdeck, he couldn't see any signs of alarm over the near miss. Like any naval officers, they would never show fear in front of the crew. But several Draesh there were clearly agitated, because they knew all about this Greek fire. He really wanted the big cowards to start the panicked squealing they emitted when in fear. Seeing the big, brave monsters suddenly terrified could throw the French crews into panic.

The next shot was short; Crawford had overcorrected. But with the whole French line moving slowly to stay with the lumbering *Trinidad*, Wyckham still had another twenty minutes or so before the French were in range to reply. He'd get in several more shots before the French fleet could get within range to reduce the stone bastion they were in into rubble.

It turned out that Crawford needed only one more try for the *Neptune*. The third shot landed right on its forecastle, disappearing from view as it burned immediately through the wood decking. A small explosion followed, probably a powder cartridge for a gun on the lower deck that was touched off.

Everyone on the bastion cheered. "Good shooting, Mister Crawford!" congratulated Wyckham. "Now see if you can land a round over her magazine." While powder magazines on a ship were deep below decks, this flaming shot could burn though a dozen decks in just moments.

The gun crashed out again, this time hitting the waist. While no secondary explosion followed, thick black smoke now started pouring out of a forward hatch near the impact of the previous hit. The first shot must have burned down to some barrels of tar in the cable



tier! Flames from the highly flammable tar burst out from *Neptune's* forward gangway, and in a flash, her three forward jibs caught fire and broke loose. With the wind spilling from her flapping sails, the huge ship lost her trim and turned to starboard, almost colliding with the following *Pluton*.

"Well, lads, it must be their mealtime!" exclaimed Wyckham. "The frogs have a nice broil going and have pulled out of the fight to cook some snails! Now let's get the galley fires going on *Pluton*—her crapauds are hungry, too!"

In the two minutes it took to reload the gun, the next French ship, *Pluton*, just got closer and easier to hit. The first shot missed a bit long, but the one after that dropped right down through the center of her main deck. Just as Crawford was about to fire a third time at *Pluton*, a huge explosion shook the ship. They'd hit the powder magazine! Her main deck disappeared in an eruption of splinters and orange flame, and the center of the ship rose up from the water. Then it settled back down, its waist bent, its spine broken, flames quickly advancing across her deck. Sailors and marines jumped overboard, desperate to escape the flames even though most couldn't swim. Some brave men stayed onboard to push the ship's boats over the side for those in the water.

That was all the next ship, *Scipione*, needed to see. Wyckham watched the ship haul her wind and turn onto a leeward reach to flee as Blake and Crawford reloaded the gun. *Scipione* was now sailing sideways to them, a faster-moving target, but in profile the two-hundred-foot ship now presented a much larger target. Crawford was too sharp a gunner to miss her at this range. The tower they were on was two hundred feet tall, and for Gunner Crawford it was like dropping fruit into a gaping wooden bowl.

Even as he was about to destroy her, Wyckham took a moment to admire the ship's sleek lines. The damned frog shipwrights did deserve credit for their work; French ships had always been better designed and faster than their British counterparts.

"Ah, what a booteeful view o' yer purty figger ye shows us, Frenchie," said Crawford, almost apologetic as he moved the gun's aim to lead the *Scipione*. "Too bad 'bout whats oy mus' do t' sech a loovly doxy." He

levered the gun well ahead of the traversing ship, watched its travel for a three seconds, then yanked the lanyard, the priming powder flashed, and another flaming streak took off from the gun's muzzle. Three seconds later, it struck *Scipione* on her side, boring through the hull on her lower starboard gun deck. An immediate explosion followed as some cartridges for the starboard battery were touched off, throwing flames up through her middle hatch. The blaze quickly ran up the mainmast, and her main course caught fire, followed by the main topsail a moment later. The big two-decker slowed to a crawl as sails broke loose and crewmen ran from the fires. Another ship out of the fight.

But while the first three ships burned, *Indomptable*, the *Trinidad*, and *Cornelie* were now a half mile from shore, where they should deploy into a firing line and begin bombarding the port's batteries, with the gate bastion their main target. Their first broadside would collapse the tower he was on, Wyckham and the Greek fire would fall into the rubble, and the fight would be over. He had fought a good fight, but the foe just had too many ships and too many guns.

But surprisingly, the three ships remained on their dead run, heading toward shore, passing right under the bastion. With the ships passing so close, Wyckham could see what they were up to. The decks were absolutely packed with soldiers in blue jackets with red facings—French marines of the Marine Nationale, armed to the teeth and ready to leap ashore.

Christ, they were headed for the dock alongside *Leviathan* to disembark troops and take the city right now. A typically French plan; frogs were always hounds for glory and had to rush into every fight. Wyckham wondered who was commanding this French invasion. While he had the numbers to break into the city along the docks, the batteries there would give his force a rough go of it. But casualties didn't seem to matter to this frog commander as long as the day was won. Well, Wyckham and Port Wyckham were certainly going to give them some casualties before this day was over.

Crawford had to move the gun over to a north-facing gun emplacement to cover the enemy's unforeseen move. But by the time he got it there and bowed into its recoiling cables, the three ships had gotten

so close that the gun on the bastion couldn't be depressed low enough to bear. *Christ, Wyckham, why did you make this tower so tall? Had to show off, didn't you?*

However, Randolph and his guns along the lower north wall had no such problem. With the ships coming into range of his black powder guns, Port Wyckham showed her teeth as Randolph's guns rumbled out and poked their muzzles through the crenellations. Wyckham watched the nearest alien gun crew, six ants in their first real fight, efficiently running their gun out under the watching eye of a gorilla gun captain. With the gun loaded and ready, the ants on the gun crew stepped back as the big simian gun captain stepped up to the breech. He leaned down to place his left empty eye socket onto the iron sphere cast on the back of the breech for the recoil ropes. He paused a moment in concentration, then yanked on a handspike with his muscular arms to move the gun a little to the left.

Damned if the creature wasn't using the gun like a deaf man's ear horn, aiming the gun by listening to sounds echoing down the gun barrel! Randolph barked, "Fire as your guns bear!" and the apeman immediately stepped aside and yanked his lanyard, sending a ball right down a line of French marines assembled on *Indomptable's* deck. Jesus, the gorilla had picked up the sounds of the singing marines! The six-inch ball made an empty row through the assembled Frenchmen, just like one of those new reapers through a wheat field. But instead of cut wheat, it was blood and body parts that went flying. *Served them right for coming here and mucking up this special day.*

In return, the ship fired its two bow carronades, trying to blow Randolph's gun crews away. But the French ship's guns had been loaded with bundles of grapeshot for sweeping the quay as her marines disembarked, and the small balls had little effect on the eight-foot stone walls protecting Randolph's gun crews. His gun crews continued to work their guns efficiently, making good practice all across the deck of the big French liner.

But with only fourteen guns in his battery, Randolph was not going to stop these ships from landing their troops. While he was reloading his guns, *Indomptable* was already nearing the quay. Once she

glided past the idle *Leviathan*, she would slide along the quay, and her marines would start leaping to the pier even before *Indomptable* tied up any hawsers. Worst of all, they would be joined by several of the giant Draesh that Wyckham could see on her deck, standing near the main deck's entryway, getting ready to leap ashore. There was no way to stop these monsters in hand-to-hand fighting on land.

Well, at least Wyckham wouldn't have to go through the ignominy of surrendering to the goddamned French. The big demons would be looking for their archenemy, the hated Captain Wyckham, and would most likely devour him right off. He supposed he should at least be thankful for that. Being captured by a bunch of pusillanimous frogs and having to listen to their explanation of why their invasion was proper was more than he could bear.

As *Indomptable* glided a few yards off from the docked *Leviathan*, he again saw Capitaine Badoin standing on deck, nodding in acknowledgement of the "Vive la France" chants coming from the fellow Frenchmen aboard the oncoming liner. But now there was a woman standing next to him. Wyckham snapped his glass back out and recognized the form of the Comtesse de Pittard, the blond noblewoman Badoin was so besotted with. Months ago, the head Firefly had taken this image and persuaded Capitaine Badoin to join with the British squadron to fight the Draesh. Diplomacy always works best when positions are discussed in the bedroom. Now she was there on *Leviathan*, a dangerous place to be with Draesh about. Why was she taking such a risk, unless the Firefly leader was about to work another last-minute miracle?

That became a distinct possibility as all eighteen of the 65 pound carronades along *Leviathan's* lower starboard gun deck exploded in a deafening broadside. While the squat, large-caliber carronades had a limited range, *Indomptable* was within pistol shot, dead off *Leviathan's* starboard side, and every shot struck home. The melon-size balls striking the wooden warship sent thousands of splinters, some as large as small trees, flying into human Frenchmen and big demons alike. The ship veered to starboard with her jibs turned to ribbons and her dead helmsman slumped over her wheel, his body impaled by dozens of

splinters, looking like a big pincushion.. *Indomptable*'s officers' calls to her crew were drowned out by the piercing squeals of the wounded Draesh aboard.

Badoin had joined the fight! Clearly, the "Comtesse de Pittard" had come aboard and pointed out that Draesh were involved in this attack, and should the French fleet win, the porcine monsters would certainly devour her. Badoin had waited until *Indomptable* came alongside, then opened his lower gunports and ripped her apart with one broadside.

Now more of *Leviathan*'s crew appeared from hiding and ran to man the upper-deck batteries. With an appreciative nod, Wyckham realized that *Leviathan*'s main deck had been already cleared for action. During the fighting, a few hands must have slowly and nonchalantly brought up powder, shot, water tubs, and all the other necessities for working the main deck guns while everyone else in the cove had been watching the shooting at the approaching French fleet.

As a result, the upper deck started firing only a few moments after the lower deck, blasting loads of grapeshot at the packed marines on the main deck, hitting more Draesh there as well. Wyckham watched in satisfaction as the hated monsters spun about, spraying blood and losing limbs as they were hit by dozens of the one-pound iron balls. *No Fireflies on the menu today, lowlife, rotting bastards!*

The two following ships turned to windward so they could be screened from *Leviathan*'s fire by the wrecked *Indomptable*, now dead in the water. French officers were yelling "Tribord, tribord!", the French word for starboard, and the final two ships hauled their wind onto a starboard reach. As the next-in-line *Trinidad* slowly turned, Randolph's guns along the north wall raked her bow with ball and grape, overturning a portside bow chaser and smashing a group of her foc'sul hands like cherries in a cider press. Then muskets crackled along the walls, their volley flashing through the still-billowing smoke from the great guns, and more Frenchmen fell.

But as her bow came round, *Trinidad*'s portside guns came to bear, and it was her turn to reply. Firing singly or in small groups, her port battery of fifty-seven big guns opened fire with solid shot, blasting the

wall's crenellations into flying bits of jagged stone. The frigate *Cornelie* followed, her 18pounders adding to the chaos along the walls. When the smoke cleared, Wyckham could see a two-hundred-foot section of the wall had been almost completely destroyed. All of the protective crenellations had been blown away, and several guns were missing from their embrasures or lying dismounted along the firing step. And there was no sign of life left there, except for some mangled dark shapes rolling about in growing red puddles. He hoped Randolph had survived the hail of stone shards from the point-blank barrage.

*Indomptable* now struck her colours, and *Leviathan* stopped firing, since the surrendered two-decker masked *Leviathan*'s guns from firing on *Trinidad* and *Cornelie*. The two remaining French ships fled into the north of the cove, making sure they kept *Indomptable* between them and *Leviathan*. They were trying to get some distance between themselves and Wyckham's guns on the tower before they turned east to make their final escape to sea. But no matter what they did, Wyckham would have a chance to give them a solid thrashing, starting any moment now when the leading *Trinidad* would be far enough off from the tall bastion so that his guns could bear.

There were two pennants flying from the 40gun *Cornelie* that Wyckham hadn't noticed before, flags that a French ship should not be flying. He snapped out his glass for a look and turned immediately incredulous with alarm and anger. Because the first flag denoted that a Royal Navy Admiral of the Red was in command, and the second was the coat of arms of one of the oldest families of East Anglia—the Jarvis family shield..

Could it be? Wyckham lowered his glass to view *Cornelie*'s quarter-deck, and there he was: Admiral Sir William Fucking Jarvis Esquire, peer of the realm and Wyckham's nemesis. His overdone gold-embroidered coat and hat were clear even at this distance. The goddamned bastard had allied himself with both England's enemy France and the universe's hated Draesh!

Jarvis was the coward who had kept his squadron out of the fight at Camperdown back in '97 and the incompetent commander who breeched his ship when arriving here through a portal. The vicious



admiral had also worked to get Wyckham hung up in Tyburn Square for his dead body to rot, even though he had saved the man's life from the first Draesh they encountered.

Good God, the man hadn't caused enough problems? He'd almost gotten the whole squadron wiped out when they first arrived on Draez, and now he'd brought both the evil Draesh and half the stinking frog navy to his door? Now all three of Wyckham's worst enemies had arrived on Freeport—the French, the Draesh, and his archenemy Jarvis! Damn the man's eyes!

*Well, he'll not see another day!* thought Wyckham. "Mister Crawford! Hold your fire for the frigates! Fire on its stern as soon as your gun bears!" There was no way Jarvis was going to survive the next few minutes. Everyone on the bastion was ready to start firing again. Loblolly boys and Krag were running up from below with the flaming munitions for both the new gun and the other four, which had been pushed back to their embrasures.. In just another few moments, the *Cornelie* would be far enough from the tower battery so these guns would bear, and fiery hell would descend on Baron Sir William Jarvis.

But then everything changed. To Wyckham, it all seemed to happen slowly, like a graceful pas de deux in the Paris Opera. First, out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the crabmen, moving too quickly through the crowded gun battery, run into a loblolly boy. They both dropped the charges they were carrying, which then broke open on the wooden floor. One was the green component of Greek fire, the other the brown, and when they met on the floor, an intense fire erupted. It immediately burned through the wooden decking and dropped out of sight.

*Oh, Jesus! We're done for!* thought Wyckham. Because in the tower's basement was the magazine filled with both gunpowder and black ooze, and the deadly Greek fire was burning down to it. When it reached the magazine, it would blow up the entire bastion, and knowing the intense heat of his Greek fire, it wouldn't take but a moment for the flames to get there. *Stay calm, Wyckham.* But he needed to get everyone off this tower in an orderly fashion and right quick! Hands behind his back, Wyckham addressed the men about him. "Gentlemen, I suggest we leave this battery forthwith. We're about to have a very violent

occurrence below that will most assuredly disturb our footing. To the stairs, this instant! Get off onto the wall ramparts and run like hell before the basement magazine blows! Don't try to go down the tower stairs to the ground; there's no time!"

Crawford understood exactly what he was talking about and ran for the walls, yelling to the other sailors on the tower to run as well. Even the slow-witted Krag got the idea and frantically headed down the stairways, rudely scrambling over the backs of everyone in front. Once on the walls, Wyckham yelled for everyone to keep moving and get as far from the city gate as possible.

The first explosions started shaking the ground and then blended into one long rolling detonation of incredible force. The black explosive in the basement went off like a hundred thunderstorms, blowing the top off the tower clean off. Fortunately, the stout city walls abutting the tower held the tower's sides in place to some extent, directing most of the explosion's force straight upward. The tower's guns and stonework went flying skyward in a high arc and rained back down into the burning rubble of the tower, though many stones and wood beams crashed down into the city as well. But Wyckham's luck held, as immense stones fell all around but missed him.

As soon as the rain of deadly debris ended, Wyckham started to organize crewmen and the ever-industrious ants to get the wounded to the hospital facility set up by the amazing Slick surgeons. Men from Rawlins's and Randolph's gun crews joined the effort once the retreating French ships got out of range of their black-powder guns. Wyckham sent them deeper into the city to search for more victims.

With the rescue efforts underway, Wyckham needed to see what the enemy was doing and climbed back up on the east wall for a view of the cove. There he could see *Neptune* and *Pluton* swamped and burning down to their waterlines. *Scipione* had sunk after her magazine blew up, with only her mastheads showing. *Indomptable* was still in one piece, now run aground in front of the north wall. Dozens of boats fleeing from these four ships, filled with French sailors and marines, many of them wounded, were headed toward shore flying white flags of surrender. Wyckham saw his marine captain, Cauley McConnell, disembarking

*Righteous* with a company of red-coated marines to march the prisoners off under guard.

Wyckham put his glass to his eye to see the *Trinidad* and *Cornelie* on a broad reach exiting the cove, heading southeast. Certainly it was a prudent decision for them to flee the battle, with most of their ships crippled and out of the fight. Even though the tower and its long-range gun had been demolished, the batteries along the city walls were still intact, and with *Leviathan* joining the fight, there were four ships to contend with as well. The city's defenders now had more guns than the enemy's remaining ships had, and the frogs never did like a close fight.

But why southeast? And it seemed an orderly and even planned retreat, as if their present course was a backup plan in case the attack on Port Wyckham failed. He narrowed his eyes and stared into the sky. *What would you do in their place, Wyckham?* The answer was obvious. Hell, he'd sail off to some remote cove on this uncharted planet, set up a fortified base, and send his Draesh allies into the interior to organize all the God-knows-how-many of their fellow monsters hiding on this world.

Just what he needed, two big French ships giving the goddamned Draesh a toehold on the planet. He could not let this happen. These ships had to be destroyed now. If they survived, it would not take long before they established a base, assembled groups of Draesh, and started raiding.

Badoin, with the Comtesse de Pittard on his arm, had left *Leviathan* and walked up to him on the wall, accompanied by his first lieutenant and a midshipman. "Bonjour, Capitaine, so 'appee to see you een won piece. What 'az happened to 'zee majeek gun?"

"Over there, some place," pointed Wyckham. "Blasted into little pieces, I'll warrant. My mistake for using crabs as loblolly boys. One of them mixed up a batch of Greek fire right at my feet instead of in a gun barrel." And he'd ended up with a defeat just when victory seemed within his grasp. *Christ, what a cockup! Had that bastard Jarvis in my sights.*

*Forget it, Wyckham.* He put a hand on the Frenchman's shoulder. "But my most serious thanks to you, sir. You made a difficult and gallant decision today, for which I will always be in your debt. Thanks to you I am standing here instead of residing in some Draesh's stomach."

"No, eet eez to you 'zat I must appologize," Badoin replied with a bow. "Please forgeeve me for abstaineeng to fight in 'zee begineeng. No one weeshes to keel 'zere contraymen. But wonce 'zee comtesse points out 'zee flag of royale France an' 'zee feelthy Draesh monstairs on 'zaire decks, I haf' no deeficulty keeling aristos who join weeth demons from 'ell. No true Franchman would allow 'zee Draesh to devowaire my leetle comtesse." He turned to the Comtesse de Pittard. "'Zere eez notheeng I would not do to protect you from being eaten, *amor*." He gave her a curt bow, and she nodded in return.

God save the French and their chivalry. Now, Badoin was no fool, and knew that his countess was the same being who was also Wyckham's Lady Brashton. But apparently a Frenchman's love knew no bounds, and he would do whatever she asked when in the form of his adored countess. The fact that revolutionaries such as him were supposed to hate all aristocrats rather than fall in love with them was a subject Wyckham never brought up with his fellow captain.

But he did need to bring up the minor subject of the French ships now heading off to begin a long war. "*Capitaine*, again my thanks, but now there is no time to lose. We must pursue those two ships and bring them to battle. They are trying to link up with more Draesh and will attempt to take the planet back. I hope you will continue to fight at my side for what we both have built here. I ask you to join your ship with mine in an immediate chase."

"*Certainement*, Capitaine," he replied strongly. "*Leviathan* weel fight zee Draesh until zay are no more. I am off to ready *Leviathan* to sail." He turned to the countess again. "I fight unteel zer are *non* Draesh left to threaten my comtesse."

"My everlasting thanks to you, fighting for this just cause," Wyckham responded. "I will not forget your loyalty. Might I also impose on you to take my midshipman here with you to your ship so he can signal similar orders to my ships? I suspect the city gate's signal pole is now residing several cables away on the streets of Port Wyckham."

Badoin nodded assent and left, while Moore ran off ahead of him to relay sailing orders to the other three ships in the cove.

While Wyckham was walking toward the quay to be rowed out to *Righteous*, he met the Yankee captain, James Harrison. "Captain Harrison, well met. The squadron is sailing immediately to bring our visitors to battle. I ask you to take command here. While I don't believe the enemy will turn back and attack the city again, I suggest you take all normal precautions." He was about to explain what he meant, but Harrison cut him short.

"Don't tarry for my sake," the American blurted out. "Get to your ship, and don't worry about matters here. I'll build a secondary wall behind the gate bastion lickety-split and get the militia organized. You go and sink those bastards."

Wyckham hoped Harrison could defend the city. With the main gun bastion collapsed, the city had lost much of its defenses and had a large breach in its walls, not to mention the batteriy destroyed by *Indomptable* along the south wall. And the entire supply of Greek fire and the new explosive had gone up in the tower's explosion. But Harrison still had plenty of black powder and shot, at least fifty guns, and the alien militia, and the only known threat to Port Wyckham had just sailed away from the city. Wyckham had to forget the city's defenses and get the chase underway.

The senior Slick diplomat in residence, known as 127 for his rank, walked up to Wyckham. The Slicks were one of the leading but oddest species in the League. Their bodies were seven feet tall, with four arms and an arrogant brain. Wyckham had named them Slicks on account of their glistening smooth skin and featureless faces. All that showed on a Slick's face were two vertical eye slits and another small slit for a mouth.

The bizarre creature spoke through his translator device. "Leader Wyckham, my people have thirteen of your people in our hospital. They will all fully recover from their injuries. But seven were dead when delivered there. Two of my species were also killed along with five ants, four gorillas, and eight Krag. Many others have been wounded, but those will recover."

Damned French and damned Draesh! Coming here on what should have been a joyous day and spreading death and destruction. And this war was just beginning. Thank God at least for the Slicks' remarkable medical abilities, which had saved thirteen of his men.

"I am most deeply indebted for your service to my wounded. And one more request, my good man. Could you get some of your remarkable surgeons aboard both *Righteous* and *Leviathan*? We sail after the foe, and I expect we'll be needing their skills in both ships' orlops quite soon."

Mister 127 nodded and headed back to his hospital as Wulfe walked up and addressed Wyckham. "Captain, how about some eyes in the air? Unlike the rest of the traders docked here, my ship's shuttle can fly about in this atmosphere. I'll get aloft and see if I can find the prey for you."

By God, that would be a real help! While no spacecraft on Draez carried weapons, Wulfe's shuttle could fly at fantastic speed through the planet's sky and would surely find the enemy ships. Wyckham sent him off and headed to the quay, where he stepped into his waiting gig along with his steward, Obujimi. Moore had also returned from his signaling chores aboard *Leviathan*, and the three of them were promptly taken out to *Righteous*, which was hove to in the cove. As they were being rowed out, Wyckham watched Wulfe's shuttle ship roar to life and take off into the air, flames shooting from its stern as it headed east at what must have been well over a hundred knots.

Moments later, they climbed aboard *Righteous* to the piping of the side party, and Lieutenant Clifton approached.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," he said with a nod. "*Righteous* is ready to sail. *Scamp* is flying a request to disembark passengers."

Hell, he had forgotten about the brig during the morning's events. The returning *Scamp* must have sailors' wives and families aboard, since Wyckham had granted some crewmen's requests to bring them here.

"No time for that. Request denied, and tell Hamilton to take station to north." He needed the handy brig to help look for the French, though he would make sure there would be no danger to its passengers. If battle was joined, he'd keep the frail little ship with its puny six-pounders out of the fight.

Anchors were hauled tight in preparation for departure as four boats filled with Slick surgeons headed their way from the docks. While *Righteous* waited for them to board, several balls of light floated

over from the shore. Stopping above him, the lead one turned into the delightful form of Lady Brashton.

“Permission for my group to come aboard?” she asked, tilting her head fetchingly to one side.

“Permission granted,” Wyckham replied with a slight bow. “But this trip will not be yachting and champagne. Though I certainly welcome your presence. Mayhap you can work us some miracles once again?”

Boats bumped up against *Righteous*, the Slick surgeons with their medical chests came aboard, anchors were weighed, topmen dropped sails from the spars which filled with loud cracks, and *Righteous* gained way to head out of the cove, along with *Leviathan*, *Vesuvius*, and *Scamp*. The chase was on. But with stiff westerly winds and a two-hour advantage, the French ships were already over the horizon. Hopefully, Wulfe’s shuttlecraft above would find them before they sheltered in some cove covered in giant trees.

Finally, Wyckham had a moment to ponder the events of the day.

*Goddamnit, who brought the French here, and how did they arrive with Draesh? That wanker William Jarvis must have guided them here, but who was in command of this French Royalist effort?*



## 6

# AN INTERGALACTIC COLONY FOR IMPERIAL FRANCE

Vice Admiral Pierre Charles Jean Baptiste Silvestre de Villeneuve furiously paced the *Trinidad*’s quarterdeck, gesturing and yelling to no one in particular. Fleet Capitaine Lieutenant Claude Touffet was standing behind him but knew to keep his distance when the admiral was in a rage. And he was as furious as Touffet had ever seen him.

“No one makes a fool of Pierre Villeneuve, especially not a crude beast!” the admiral mumbled, working himself up even further. He’d been on this disgusting world for only two hours, and already most of his fleet was destroyed or captured, and he had had to flee the battle with only one ship of the line and a frigate to conquer an entire world? What a complete fool he’d been to listen to the big monster’s promises of easy conquest and a world brimming with gold!

It had all started six months ago. He had been hiding out in Marseilles for the many years since Trafalgar, trying to avoid Napoleon’s agents. He had staged a fake suicide in a Rennes hotel, which was reported in all the newspapers, but he’d heard that the authorities

on the Paris committee hadn't accepted it and were still searching for him. *Sacrebleu*, Trafalgar was ten years ago! Didn't the mad Corsican peasant have more pressing matters to attend to than the ghosts of Trafalgar? But no, apparently he did not, and he placed the blame for the loss entirely on Villeneuve. Was it his fault that his Spanish ships surrendered so quickly? And who knew that Nelson would violate every rule of maritime engagement and sail right into the French line, instead of following traditional naval discipline and fighting from a parallel line?

He'd already had too much wine that afternoon in the tavern along the Marseilles docks when a corpulent man in a crooked wig sat down at his table and introduced himself as William Jarvis Esq., a dismissed British admiral. While Villeneuve generally despised Englishmen, this one had a fat purse to buy drinks and an amusing story to tell. Villeneuve laughed at his incredulous tale of an entire new world populated by a race of giant pigs, now in the hands of a small English squadron. A world that could be easily taken by a French fleet if it made cause with the world's previous owners. And you could get there by sailing through a hole in the sea near Ushant! He must have laughed for ten minutes straight, almost had a seizure.

But Villeneuve stopped laughing when Jarvis showed him a gold nugget the size of an apple, and that persuaded the opportunistic admiral to follow the man a short way out of town for a rendezvous in a local forest, where supposedly he could see the truth for himself. There he was astonished to meet a thirty-foot Draesh, just as Jarvis had described—big as a house, covered in mottled brown fur, bloodshot eyes the size of Spanish melons, teeth like daggers, and those small, demon-like pointed ears. When it bowed to the admiral and actually spoke in a growling voice, "Bonjour, Vice Admiral Pierre Charles Jean Baptiste Silvestre de Villeneuve," the shock was too overwhelming, and Villeneuve fainted.

After he quickly regained his senses, the giant creature, speaking in excellent court French, clearly confirmed Jarvis's story. It was correct that a hole would appear periodically at a certain spot in the English Channel, through which ships could pass back and forth to Draez, his homeworld. The damned English squadron had used it to arrive

there on his peaceful planet, where all weapons had been prohibited, killing many of its residents and taking power with the help of some vicious foreigners.

This fellow, who went by the name of Daxant, had swum beneath a departing English brig back on Draez, along with some of his colleagues, and held on while it traveled back to Earth. Now they were trying to assemble England's enemies in an expedition to go back and reclaim the planet. Daxant assured him that there was plenty of room on the planet for a French colony, right in an area brimming with gold, a metal the Draesh had no use for. If Villeneuve could assemble a fleet, he could easily take the planet back from the occupying English force, a puny squadron of three ships and fewer than a hundred guns, with just a young captain in command. The only ship of the line there was a French one, *Leviathan*, which would certainly join with him in any fight against the English. In turn, the thankful, peace-loving Draesh would grant him a charter for a large colony in the name of France.

He would be a rich and powerful colonial governor, overseeing a second new world! Backed by the planet's gold, he would regain prestige for himself and his fellow aristocrats, friends he had been forced to denounce to keep his rank in the French navy. He might even depose the Corsican revolutionary and restore the House of Bourbon to the throne. His name and family standing would be restored, his lands returned, and he would be a major player at the royal court.

Over the next few days, Villeneuve sobered up and began contacting the idle Royalist French and Spanish captains he knew in Marseilles and Toulon. With several chests of gold supplied by Daxant, the quartermasters in the ports were bribed, the *Nuestra Senora de la Santisima Trinidad* was rebuilt, ships were provisioned, and officers and crews with Bourbon leanings were assembled. Orders sending the ships back to Egypt were forged, and the formidable squadron had set sail a month ago. But instead of making for Egypt, it sailed west into the Atlantic and then north to beat back and forth some fifty miles north of Brest. There the squadron rendezvoused with the merchant schooner *Freya*, a Prussian ship they'd met off Marseilles, and paid its captain to go onto Portsmouth and bring them back any news of *Scamp*.



Her commander told him that while *Scamp* was not in port, her crewmen were in the local taverns, talking about getting back aboard ship in four days. Daxant guided the fleet to the spot where the magic gates would appear, and sure enough, there they were. The *Trinidad* brushed aside a stubborn English frigate, and the six ships entered the portals to immediately drop down onto the planet's waters.

Then matters quickly deteriorated into the current fiasco. The supposedly vulnerable enemy had built a strongly defended city, and had a deadly long-range gun that spat hellfire! To top it all off, the damned Jacobite capitaine aboard *Leviathan* switched sides right in the middle of the battle and turned on his fellow Frenchmen!

He'd just summoned Daxant for an explanation and a dressing-down for leading them into this debacle, but the damned beast was off in the water, consulting with several others of his species a cable off the bow. Villeneuve's rage mounted as the giant creature ignored Captain Touffet's calls through his brass speaking trumpet. First this big cretin takes them into a trap, then he ignores a summons to his admiral? Villeneuve's mind was already considering a list of punishments for Daxant's intelligence failure and insolence.

Finally, the big creature climbed aboard and approached the quarterdeck. But it stopped for a moment to scoop up one of the ever-present shipboard rats and throw it into his mouth. *Sacrebleu, how did I join with such disgusting beings?* He knew that these Draesh ate living animals, but rats? More anger and revulsion welled up inside Villeneuve at this sordid creature. How dare this thing stop to eat some filthy vermin while his admiral awaited?

"Good news," it said in excellent French with its deep raspy voice. "My compatriots inform us that a base had been established two days' sail from here. It is in a warren of coves that will be impossible for the stupid English to discover. Your fleet can remain there while more Draesh rally to our cause. Within at most a few weeks, our joined forces should easily defeat the occupiers. We will have our homeworld back, and you will have your colony."

That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Villeneuve went wild. "Good news? Everything is just fine? You ignorant, filthy, deceitful

animal! Four of my ships are destroyed, along with over two thousand men wounded, dead or surrendered. And everything is just fine? You incompetent fool!"

Even though he was looking up at the huge beast, he was too angry to hold back. He was so enraged that spittle was flying halfway up on the creature's chest. "You never bothered to tell me that the stinking goddamns had some new kind of gun that could shoot incredibly hot shot three kilometers, and with accuracy. It didn't take more than an hour of fighting for the many months of planning to be undone! Yet you tell me 'good news'?"

"Bah!" Villeneuve was done talking with this ignorant animal. "Corporal," he called to the leader of the marine squad that Villeneuve had wisely been keeping on deck since sailing with the giant Draesh. "You will arrest this...this troll! Bind it and tie it onto the barge!" The creature was too large to be taken below, but *Trinidad* carried a good-size barge on its deck. It would make a suitable place to tie down the giant creature.

As Capitaine Touffet stepped forward, a marine aimed a swivel gun at the thing, and the entire squad crisply leveled their muskets. "Monsieur Daxant!" Touffet proclaimed. "You are under arrest! Place your hands behind your back immediately, or you will be shot!"

Daxant's visage, previously one of diplomacy, now turned frighteningly sinister. Its upper lip drew back in a horrible sneer that bared its bone-crushing teeth. "You miserable little pricks! You blame me for what happened back there, when it was one of your own that turned on us with that big ship and completely foiled the attack? You'd assured me he would join with us! And now you think to arrest me?" It leaned down to the deck and put its monstrous face right into Villeneuve's. "Actually, I'm the one who deserves payment for your failure, would you not agree? And since I am feeling a bit peckish as well, I think I will accept your obedient puppy here as the toll."

With lightning speed, the monster lunged at the marine manning the quarterdeck's swivel gun and swept him over the side with its left arm. The rest of the marines fired their muskets, but the monster was unaffected and lunged a second time with its right arm to knock the

whole squad against the quarterdeck rail, crushing ribs and knocking men unconscious. Then it grabbed Touffet and lifted him off the deck. Villeneuve's eyes expanded in wide-open terror as the beast ripped off Touffet's left arm and threw it into its mouth! The fleet capitaine thrashed and screamed in agony, "Stop...Jesus Christ!" while the Draesh appeared to be thoughtfully chewing a new hors d'oeuvre and rolling it about its pallet. Then he nonchalantly tore off the man's right leg and started chewing on it as well! Touffet passed out from the pain, and Villeneuve collapsed to his knees. The beast threw the remainder of Capitaine Claude Touffet into his mouth, chewed twice, and swallowed. The rest of the crew had stopped working at their tasks and were staring in terror, frozen like statues.

Villeneuve, paralyzed with fear, watched the Draesh as he tilted his head, as if he were reviewing the meal. "An interesting fellow, this Claude Touffet. His knowledge of sailing and gunnery are quite extensive. A very useful meal."

Then it grabbed Villeneuve and raised him to its gaping mouth. Villeneuve fainted, but the monster shook him awake.

"Listen to me, you insignificant rodent! No time to sleep! You will take this ship where I tell you and fight when I tell you! If you refuse, you'll be my next meal, and I'll get all the remaining knowledge I need to run this joke of a weapon system without you! Now get us underway—follow the Draesh in the water!"

In a dreamlike daze, Villeneuve called for the ship's first lieutenant to up anchor, and soon the big French liner, along with the frigate *Cornelie*, had set all plain sail and was heading southeast.



## 7

### NEW ALLIES

In his great cabin aboard *Righteous*, Wyckham fumed at the difficulty of finding two enemy ships on an uncharted sea. And naturally, this night had to be one of the few on Draez when there actually was a period of darkness. With two suns, the planet usually had continuous sunlight, but today, the two suns had gone over the horizon within minutes of each other and darkness had descended; the planet had no moons. With no charts or familiarity with the waters, *Righteous* could not sail in darkness and risk hitting a submerged reef or rock, and she had hove to for the night. Wulfe's shuttlecraft, which, unlike alien military spacecraft, had no ability to see or navigate in darkness, had also given up for the night and was hovering off the starboard bow.

Wyckham had kept the squadron moving all day. The French had a four-hour head start and could be far away by now. He had his four ships spread out in a six-mile-wide screen, each ship just within signaling range, but they'd seen nothing so far.

Wyckham, Lieutenants Rawlins and Clifton, the marine captain McConnell, Wulfe, and Lady Brashton were in the great cabin, poring over the one chart the squadron had made of the area during short



trips from Port Wickham. It outlined the shape of the coastline for over one hundred and twenty miles south, but none of the deep bays had been explored. Most likely the enemy had spent the night hidden in one of these coves. But poor as this chart was, at least the squadron had some documentation of the seas about, while there was no reason to think the French ships had anything at all to guide them. Then Wyckham remembered they had native Draesh aboard. They were surely familiar with the local waters and probably knew of a deep cove well suited for large ships to spend the night.

“So where are they off to, gentlem...ah...my...esteemed advisors?” asked Wyckham. He had forgotten that for the first time while planning an action, he had a woman in his cabin. At least there was a being present in the form of Lady Brashton, though Wyckham wasn’t sure exactly what gender she was, since at times in the past she had appeared in male image—very male image. Wyckham still cringed at Wulfe’s description of her arriving on his world in the image of a naked and very well-endowed male wolf warrior. But it was still not right to address this beautiful visage in front of him as a “gentleman.”

“They were headed south-southeast when last we saw them, hugging the southern coastline,” offered Rawlins, his first lieutenant and lifelong friend. “They probably don’t know bollocks about where they are. I’m saying that the frogs were surprised back there, and they just took off with the southerly winds to find a cove to hide in and make repairs. We can be careful and take our time. We’ll find the buggers in the first big cove we see, hove to and licking their wounds.”

“I think they had a secondary plan if forced to retreat,” countered Wyckham. “And that plan would certainly have included some kind of fortified base to safely retire into. We need to find them and bring them to battle before they get there. Miss Brashton, you know more about our foes. Do you not agree that the Draesh were too smart not to have prepared for a possible retreat?”

“Yes, I’m, sure they had a secondary plan, and it would include provisions for a protected base to fall back into. I expect that they also have stored provisions and made plans for additional attacks, but what those might be I cannot guess,” she answered in an even tone.

“Draesh are very capable in military matters. I would expect them to have considered every contingency and made many plans in reserve. Especially since they surely have hidden agents in the city and were probably aware that you were testing very powerful new weapons that might defeat their initial attack.”

*Hmphh!* Of course there would be spies in the city, probably some of the stinking snakes, and they could have reported everything to Draesh living in the nearby forests. But the French and Draesh had decided to attack anyway. Probably they had believed that the new weapons were not yet practicable. Or maybe the big demons never told their French allies anything about the new gun and munitions, fearing they might cancel the invasion?

So the enemy had someplace to go, and it could be near or far. But chances were that they would hide until dawn in the first large bay they found, since no ship wanted to sail at night in uncharted waters. Although maybe some of their damned Draesh knew the waters well enough to pilot them at night? Well, sailing at night in uncharted waters was not something Wyckham was willing to risk. He could not continue in the dark. “Well, there’s nothing else for it. We’ll have another try at dawn,” he said, trying to hide his dejection.

“You cannot find them?” asked Lady Brashton. “Then let me go on deck and see what I can learn from the local animal life. Certainly two large wooden ships going by would attract a lot of attention from the sea creatures swimming about. Some of them must have stored some facts in their brains that I could download. Let me get out in the open.”

“By all means,” said Wyckham as he motioned toward the door. Damn, but a magic fairy had its uses! He followed her up the rear gangway and out to the main deck. *She’s going to read the minds of fishes?* This he had to see.

The lady leaned over the port rail and turned her head sideways, like a hound at the start of a hunt. She had explained to Wyckham that she could better read the facts in another mind the closer she was, since the air in mass-based worlds was full of electrical charges that interfered with her own electrical inquiries. She closed her eyes in concentration.

“Well, there are certainly many organisms below that earlier noticed two large craft going by. But so far, I do not see any stored facts about the location or direction. Ah, wait, here we are! A school of large whales was very impressed by the ‘strange, fast surface beings’ that passed a while ago. Since the French ships remained on the surface, the whales believe them to be fellow mammals, heading to the spring mating cove where they are going themselves. Now they are actually hoping to find and mate with this new species. We could just follow their spouts as they breathe, but they have stopped to investigate us as well. Let’s hope they soon lose interest and resume their journey.”

Just then one of the huge beasts breached just yards off the port bow, eyeballing the four ships as it fell back with a loud thump and a wide splash. While it was only partly revealed for a moment, Wyckham could see it was a gargantuan creature. Similar to the killer whales of the northern Pacific, black and white, only much larger, about half the length of *Righteous*. It had eyes the size of serving bowls and a head full of curved teeth like heavy cavalry sabers.

A moment later, *Righteous* shook as if it had run aground. *Oh, Jesus, no!* While the ship was hove to, it was still making some leeway in the current. “Leadsman!” Wyckham bellowed. “How many fathoms do we have?” As a precaution in uncharted waters, *Righteous* had a man on the bow throwing a graduated line with a lead weight to take soundings. “Still no ba-um wi’f ’is line, cap’n,” the man replied.

So they weren’t aground. But the ship shuddered again, this time more violently. What the hell was going on?

Lady Brashton provided the answer. “The whale-like beasts are communicating with clicking sounds,” said Lady Brashton. “They are quite excited...” she seemed to concentrate for a moment. “I believe these beasts are attempting to mate with your ship.”

*Oh, Christ, just wonderful.* Again the ship was shaken from below. Looking back at the poop deck, Wyckham saw the helm suddenly spin and drag the helmsman over the top and dash him to the deck before he had a chance to let go of the wheel. Crewmen helped the man up as others yanked the wheel back to keep the ship hove to. Christ, one of the damned things was humping the rudder! The ship shuddered

again from another collision below as the men on the wheel fought to keep it steady. There was no way the rudder could withstand the passionate advances of such large creatures. It would soon break, and this chase would be over.

Suddenly all the thudding against the hull stopped. What had happened? Maybe the goddamned thing had satisfied itself? He looked about to see Lady Brashton bent over and emitting loud clicking noises. Then she replanted her feet on the deck and walked over to Wyckham.

“Their amorous attentions have ceased,” she said. “Their rudimentary language was easy to decipher, and I was able to explain who you are and persuade them to stop. Which wasn’t difficult since they are quite thankful to you now, after I uploaded to them the story of your victory at Hollow Mountain. The Draesh used to hunt and torture them, and these whales are very pleased that you have killed so many of their enemies. They will help you pursue them now. Follow them. They will lead us to where the French fleet is, avoiding any shoals in the dark. And in the future, they wish to help us in any way possible. They will make for powerful and trustworthy allies.”

A whole pod of the giant whales—at least a score of the giant beasts—surfaced about a cable to port and started swimming southwest. But one of them tarried, seeming to stare at Wyckham. Damned if it didn’t give him a wink before diving below to swim ahead and join its mates!

Once again, Lady Brashton had saved the day. With the whales’ wakes sparkling in the phosphorescent sea, the squadron had an easy path to follow. Now the squadron could sail through the night in the uncharted waters, something the enemy could not do. Wyckham’s ships should be able to make up the four hours’ head start and bring the enemy to battle on the morrow. Sails were unfurled, a new helmsman took the wheel, the old one was taken below to the surgeon, *Righteous* regained her way, and once again, the chase was on.



## 8

### SEA ROOM AND A WILLING FOE

Dawn was breaking as Wyckham mounted the quarterdeck, accepted a mug of steaming coffee from his steward, Obujimi, and surveyed the sea around him. The rare darkness was ending, and dawn showed the squadron still in good formation, thanks to the new allies who had guided the four ships through the short night. Wyckham could see *Vesuvius* a mile to port and *Leviathan* and *Scamp* strung out to starboard. With daylight, they would be all scanning the horizon in hope of seeing the two French ships. A dense fog layer hovered a few hundred feet over them, ruining Wulfe's visibility from his craft above, but the ships below faced only a thin haze.

"Joy of the day, captain," said Lieutenant Rawlins, giving the traditional morning greeting shared by naval officers on days when action was imminent.

"Joy of the day to you as well, sir," he replied with a nod. Then they both perked up as they saw four signal flags run up *Leviathan's* mizzenmast and pop open at the crosstrees. Before he could draw Midshipman Moore's attention to them, the "young gentleman" had his signal book out and was reading the flags aloud.

“Signal from *Leviathan*, relayed from *Scamp*: ‘Enemy south-southeast, two miles!’” he excitedly yelled out.

“Good news, that, Mister Moore! Be so good as to run up ‘Squadron to south-southeast.’” He turned to see an attentive Obujimi, standing there with Wyckham’s telescope, a superb instrument from Leica in Savoy. He snapped the glass out but saw nothing as he scanned the southern horizon. With the morning’s haze yet to burn off, visibility was still poor around *Righteous*, but *Scamp* was miles farther south and apparently had the French ships in sight.

“Beat to quarters, captain?” It was Lieutenant Rawlins saving Wyckham from even having to issue the order.

“Beat to quarters, Mister Rawlins.” He grinned back at his lifelong friend. They had known each other since attending the same public school at Haversham, and Rawlins could often anticipate his captain’s words. “And I’d admire if you got the boats over the side.” In a battle, no one wanted ship’s boats on deck to explode into splinters. *Righteous*’s gig, barge, and cutter would be hoisted over the side to be towed astern.

Bosuns’ pipes shrilled, drums rolled, and *Righteous* cleared for action. Gun trucks rumbled as crewmen ran the guns back to remove the red tompions from their muzzles and load the ship’s 38 great guns. Firelocks were attached, and loblolly boys scampered below to fetch powder and shot. Marines in their red kits clambered up from below, some of them climbing up into the tops with their muskets, others loading and manning the ship’s twelve swivel guns. The arms locker was opened, and muskets, pistols, cutlasses, and pikes were distributed to the crew. Water buckets were placed by the guns for swabbing them out, and tubs with burning slow match were also set up in case the firelocks failed. Finally the gun captains settled into their positions at the breeches, the rope firing lanyards in their hands. After a little over eight minutes, all the hustle and bustle ceased, and the ship was ready to fight.

Wyckham kept peering through his glass for the first sighting of the enemy. The haze was definitely clearing away as the second sun rose and the winds picked up, making for a perfect sailor’s day. “Sea room and a willing foe,” the captain mused aloud, stating the Royal

Navy’s official toast for Friday supper. “Doesn’t get any better than this, ‘ey?” Wyckham was eager for a crack at the French invaders, the evil Draesh, and his old foe Jarvis.

“No sir, it surely does not,” responded Rawlins.

But they would fight this engagement without any help from their magical fairy. The glowing orb that was Lady Brashton had floated off into the air as soon as the enemy was sighted. With Draesh aboard the nearby French ships, she had to leave. The evil monsters had some terrible power over Fireflies and could consume their living energy from a considerable distance.

Within a few minutes, the coastline came into view. Now he could see *Scamp*, beating northeast in the mouth of a large bay. The frogs must have heaved to in this bay last night! Wyckham and his two lieutenants worked their glasses, scanning all the small coves for the two French ships.

“Ahoy th’ deck!” It was topman James in the main crosstrees, the sailor with the keenest eyes on *Righteous*, who had first seen the Draesh when they fell into this world. “Two sail southwest, two miles!”

The three officers turned their glasses to port, and there they were—the *Trinidad* and *Cornelie*, full-and-by to exit the bay. But with the northerly wind at their backs, the British had the weather gauge and could choose when to attack. The two French ships had to continue slowly beating against the wind, awaiting the British ships. If they dropped off and tried to run, they would enter the small coves along the lee shore and be dashed aground in minutes.

“Mister Moore, signal to *Leviathan* to cross the bow of the *Trinidad* and engage; signal to *Scamp* and *Vesuvius* to remain back from the fight.” Wyckham’s two smaller ships had served to form the screen he had needed to find the French; their job was now done. The small ships would be useless in this fight. Their twelve-pounders would have little effect on the thick sides of the two French ships, and their own thin construction would not stand up for long under the punishment of the enemy’s eighteen- and thirty-two-pounders.

*Leviathan* was leading and began making small corrections to cross in front of the *Trinidad*. With thirty-eight sixty-five-pound carronades

per side, *Leviathan* had a larger weight-of-shot in her broadside than the fifty-six thirty-eight pounders along the *Trinidad's* side. *Righteous* would closely follow behind her as long as possible to stay protected from the French ships' fire as they approached. Once *Righteous* was close enough, at a time when the French ships were reloading, the handy frigate would turn to port and pass between the two foes, deliver raking broadsides into both, and then turn to port and engage the *Cornelie* alongside. At Trafalgar, Nelson had shown the wisdom of sailing into the foe's battle line and splitting it apart, eliminating any mutual support between ships. When he crossed her bows, Wyckham would try to hit *Cornelie* hard enough with his first broadside that she would lose speed and drop away from the protection of the formidable 120-gun *Trinidad*.

While the bows of the two British ships would take fire from the French ships' starboard batteries as they approached, it would be nothing compared to the close raking *Righteous* and *Leviathan* would deliver with their first broadsides. When a warship crossed the bow or stern of a foe, its fire would bowl lengthwise through the enemy ship, knocking down whole gun crews from bow to stern and throwing splinters everywhere. A raking broadside at such close range was usually all it would take to decide a battle, taking out too many guns and crewmen for a ship to fight effectively. *Leviathan* in particular could devastate an opponent in a close rake with her big sixty-five-pound carronades.

"Mister Clifton," Wyckham called out to his second lieutenant. "A man in the chains with a lead, if you would." *Righteous* needed to take soundings of the cove's depth as they approached the two Royalist ships. It was an old trick for a ship caught on a lee shore to lure its pursuer onto submerged rocks. The Draesh aboard the Royalist ships might be familiar with the cove and could have directed the enemy ships to sail along the inside of a reef.

*Righteous* and *Leviathan* were about a mile off and closing fast. Looking through his Leica telescope, Wyckham saw some kind of commotion in the bows of both French ships. Something was hitting their forecourses from the backside, creasing the sails and jiggling their spars. Something was going on back there, but with the ship's rolling

motion, Wyckham couldn't make it out through his unsteady glass. He needed sharper eyes.

"James," he called out to the man up on lookout. "What do you make of those luffing forecourses?"

Topman James, the keenest eye on *Righteous*, was looking through his own telescope. "There's sump'in' behind 'em, sor. It's...they gots one o' th' big demons back there, sor! Now...I makes out three of 'em, sor!"

The goddamned things were hiding on the forecastles behind the foremast's sails, which were hauled in tight as the ship beat against the wind. What were they up to? Probably getting in position to leap aboard the attacking ships if they got the chance. Just one of them on deck would make for a rough fight. They'd gotten aboard *Righteous* twice before, and each fight had been a close-run thing.

"Mister Moore, signal to *Leviathan*, 'Keep distance, avoid boarders,' if you would. Helm, belay going between them, drop off, we'll rake *Cornelie's* stern." The *Trinidad* had probably been planning to slow down as the British approached, forcing *Righteous* to sail through a narrow gap between the two French ships so the big demons could leap or swim quickly aboard. *Righteous* dropped off from behind *Leviathan* to cross the enemy frigate's stern instead, keeping a safe distance from her rather than squeezing between them both. But now she was exposed to *Cornelie's* main battery. The battle was about to begin.

Wyckham needed to take one more precaution before the fight started. Twice before, Draesh had swum up under the surface and boarded the ship. "Mister Rawlins, be so good as to get the forward cannonades swiveled inward, and Captain McConnell, make sure your men on the swivels are ready for any unwelcome visitors climbing aboard." In the previous two instances, the bow carronades and the swivel had saved *Righteous* from boarding Draesh.

At a quarter mile separation, the sides of the two French ships exploded in orange flame, firing broadsides of chain and bar shot at the British rigging and sails. It was standard French practice to disable an opponent's sails and then outmaneuver a foe or escape. But chain and bar were notoriously inaccurate at this range, and the total



result of *Cornelie*'s first broadside was one hole in *Righteous*'s fore top-sail. *Leviathan* seemed unharmed as well, despite having received the much larger broadside of the *Trinidad*'s thirty-two-pounders, and she continued on a heading to cross the French liner's bow. *Foolish frogs*, Wyckham thought. In their place, he would have concentrated the *Trinidad*'s fire on the more vulnerable *Righteous*, trying to take out one ship at a time. Other than the Battle of the Virginia Capes in '81, where the *Compte de Grasse* defeated a British fleet under Thomas Graves and won the Americans their independence, the French Navy never seemed to fight a smart battle against the British.

The distance between the opposing ships was now less than three cables. The French would only have time for one more broadside before *Righteous* crossed her stern. But with the shortening range, this broadside might not leave the attacking ships' sails so unscathed. Hopefully, enough canvas wouldn't get shot away to keep them from boxing in the two French ships. The only hope the Royalists had was to shoot away their attackers' sails and then maneuver for the weather gauge themselves.

The young forecabin midshipman, Kenneth Simmons, ran up to the base of the quarterdeck. "Gunner Crawford's respects, sir, and might he open up with the bow chasers?"

Like most frigates, *Righteous* mounted two brass nine-pounders forward, mainly used in a chase to disable the enemy's rigging and slow him down. While they were too small to do much damage ship to ship, there was always the chance of a lucky shot, and it would keep the crew distracted while they waited for the coming French broadside.

"My compliments to Mister Crawford, and he may fire as he sees fit." Certainly there was no reason not to, though it was probably a waste of good powder and shot. But wait—this was Crawford. Maybe he could get off another brilliant shot the way he did months ago, when he shot the jaw off the *Draesh* king at almost a half mile?

"Hold a moment, Mister Simmons. Tell Mister Crawford to see if he can hit the big pigs playing hide-and-seek behind their forecabin." Wyckham was confident that his ship could best any frog frigate, but the presence of any of the giant monsters was discomfiting—they

could turn any fight around. Might as well try to take a few out of the fight before the big monsters could start whatever the hell it was they were planning.

Moments later, he saw Crawford fire off the port-side bow chaser, holing the French frigate's forward staysail to the creature's left. Crawford moved to the starboard gun, made a few adjustments with a handspike, and yanked its lanyard. This time, the hole appeared right in the middle of the forecabin, followed by the sail tightening as something pushed up against it from the other side. Then, suddenly, the sail ripped right down the middle, and out came one of the big monsters! With blood gushing from a hole in its chest where the apple-size ball had struck, the *Draesh* fell through the forecabin and toppled overboard, to the cheers of *Righteous*'s crew.

The elation was short lived, as *Cornelie* fired her second broadside, this time with solid shot, raking the ship's hull from bow to stern. At least three balls bowled right down the entire length of the main deck. Two sailors were hidden in a red mist from their own vaporized blood, others were impaled in a hail of splinters, and one of the eighteen-pounders at the end of the port battery was dismounted.

Someone had persuaded the French captain to abandon traditional French gunnery tactics and target the hull instead of the rigging. It had to be Jarvis. Though he was a complete fool, he'd been in the navy long enough to see the folly of French gunnery's focus on rigging versus the British belief in pounding the foe's hull. After the unimpressive results from *Cornelie*'s first broadside, Jarvis had loaded her guns with roundshot and aimed for the hull, the result being dead and wounded Englishmen. Wyckham's hatred for the man escalated to new heights.

But that was the last broadside *Cornelie* would get off, because *Righteous* was now off her stern quarter, past where her starboard battery could bear. And now it was *Righteous*'s turn to return the favour, by raking the French ship at a much closer and deadlier range. "Let go main and fore tops'ls," Wyckham bellowed out. The waiting crew jumped to the sheets, and *Righteous*'s sails flapped free, the ship slowing down to give the gun crews more time.

Lieutenant Clifton had charge of the starboard battery. "Each gun will fire when instructed by the gunner!" he yelled and then nodded to Crawford to take over. Crawford stood by the first gun on the fore-castle and calmly called out to the starboard battery, "Gun cap'ns, fire yer guns as oy pass by 'n tap ye on yer shoulders. Shoot straight through 'er stern; we'll plow th' froggies o'er th' sides."

*Righteous's* bowsprit passed the Frenchman's stern as she fired her two stern chasers, a bit premature for Wyckham's thinking. One shot went high, and the other blew a hole in *Righteous's* port scantlings, throwing splinters off the ship and doing no harm. Crawford started walking down the starboard battery to touch each gun captain's shoulder when he wanted him to fire. With only half a cable separating the two ships, they couldn't miss. Crawford tapped the first gun captain on the shoulder, and the first gun went off, sending its double load right through two stern windows. Wyckham couldn't see the damage over the *Cornelie's* high stern, but the two eighteen-pound roundshot that went right down her starboard side must have wrought havoc among the lined-up gun crews.

But just as the second gun prepared to fire, everything changed.

Three more of the giant Draesh had been hiding behind sails, and now they popped up, cocked their arms, and threw something. Christ, they had lured *Righteous* close and now were throwing immense handfuls of grapeshot! With their hands the size of parlor chairs, each throw lofted hundreds of the two-inch balls to rain down on *Righteous's* main deck. While the flying egg-size balls had nowhere near the power of grapeshot fired from a cannon, they could certainly wound a man and pummel him to the ground. Most of the crew was knocked down or forced to abandon the guns, ducking or putting their arms up for protection. Immediately the three demons threw a second barrage, having loaded up both hands with the small missiles. Then they scooped up more balls from a wooden bin at their feet, keeping a constant hail of iron descending on *Righteous's* deck. No crew could fight a ship under such an attack.

*Goddammit, outfoxed by these rotting pigs again!* Wyckham had planned to jibe the ship to stay astern and continue raking her, but now he'd

have to set some sails and move out of range of the damned monsters' arms. But if *Righteous* sailed past *Cornelie*, she herself would suffer a severe raking as she slowly left.

And that clearly was *Cornelie's* plan, because Wyckham could see all her crewmen on the starboard guns crossing the deck to man the port side. And they would give him a good pasting, too, since *Righteous* had pulled up so close to *Cornelie*. She'd give *Righteous* the kind of raking Wyckham had planned to give to her. The kind of raking that could decide an engagement.

With only the gun deck below him under assault, Wyckham was unharmed up on the quarterdeck, but he felt absolutely powerless and had no idea what to do. The only defense was for the crew to leave their guns and scuttle below deck. Christ, the ship was done for. Should he strike his colours? The French would honor a surrender, but would the Draesh? Wyckham's mind was frozen with indecision.

But Crawford's wasn't. There he was, running along the guns yelling like hell, holding the big wooden lid from the scuttlebutt over his head. To Wyckham, he looked like an ancient Spartan soldier at Thermopylae, his shield up for protection from the Persian arrows.

"Quoins out! Quoins out! Throw in a load o' grape! Now, mates, now! Shoot th' fookers a'fore it's too late!"

Crawford was trying to take out the three monsters with a volley of grapeshot. The guns had been loaded with roundshot, which required a well-aimed gun to hit a target. But the gun crews couldn't take the time to aim the big guns under the steady rain of missiles from the big pigs. On the other hand, grapeshot would spread out like a shotgun blast and couldn't miss at this range.

The ship had partly drifted past the French frigate, and only her aft guns would bear. Crawford was running to get down to them before *Righteous* passed the enemy's stern. After that, the ship would have to set some sails and maneuver to get back into the fight, all the while getting punished by the Draeshs' arms and shot at by muskets firing from *Cornelie's* fighting tops. He only had a few seconds to add a load of grapeshot to each gun and remove the quoins, raising the guns' elevation to spray the Draesh up on deck.



Most of the gun crews had fled below decks, and the rest were hiding behind the masts. So Crawford bent down and scooped up a bundle of grapeshot himself and worked along the gun deck to the ninth gun along the side, all the time holding the water cask's lid over his head and staying low behind the starboard gunwales. He quickly threw in a bundle of grapeshot, then grabbed a handspike and knocked the wedge-shaped quoin out, causing the breech to drop with a thud as the muzzle turned skyward. Crawford grabbed the lanyard and fired the gun. Without waiting to see the results, he grabbed another load of grape and jumped to the next gun, all the time yelling, "Mates! Ever'won! Quoins out 'n a load o' grape! Now, mates, now!"

Some crewmen were coming back! They had heard Crawford and were dashing back on deck from the forward gangway. But they had to stop and duck behind the starboard gunwales when more balls rained down on them, not having any protection like the wood disc Crawford had.

Wyckham himself was close to the aft guns, those that were still bearing on *Cornelie*. Christ, Wyckham, join the fight! But if he was going to descend to the gun deck, he needed something to protect himself from the deluge of grape balls. In his cabin! He leaped down the short stairway to his cabin, grabbed the large silver tray under his brandy decanters and yanked it out, then ran back up on deck, paying no mind to the sounds of crystal decanters breaking on his cabin floor.

Balls clanged off the tray held over his head as he jumped down to the last starboard gun. A second crash forward showed that Crawford had fired another gun. Wyckham grunted as a ball got past his tray and struck his chest, almost knocking him over. Christ, kneel down like Crawford, you fool! He ducked low behind the gunwales, grabbed a twenty-five-pound bundle of grapeshot, and shoved it down the gun's muzzle as far as he could. Then he crawled back to the breech, grabbed a handspike, pried the quoin out, and pulled the lanyard. There had been no time to aim, but hopefully the unrammed grape bundle would spray wide enough to hit the three giant creatures looming above him.

The gun fired, jumping back into its restraining cables. Immediately the hail of grape balls about him dropped in intensity. Wyckham didn't

stop to see what had happened; he couldn't see through the smoke anyway. Instead he immediately jumped to the next gun and stuffed a second bundle of grapeshot down the barrel. As he crawled back to the breech, he looked up momentarily and saw the closest of the Draesh, bleeding from several wounds, cocking his arm to throw at Wyckham. And he was aiming at Wyckham with his hand full of big eighteen-pound roundshot! Wyckham threw the silver tray aside and lunged for the gun's breech—the tray certainly wouldn't protect him from grapefruit-size cannonballs. His only chance was to fire the gun first.

But he didn't have the time to get the quoin out and fire the gun before the big demon threw. And the damned Draesh knew it; the evil bastard was actually smiling as he started his throw. What a way to die. Killed by a giant bowler instead of action against the French.

A resounding crash from his left signaled salvation at hand. Crawford had fired another gun in the nick of time, spraying the big cricket bowler across its head and chest. It dropped its handful of roundshot and slumped to the deck. Thank God again for Crawford!

And now more crewmen were braving the deck, with the rain of grapeshot momentarily halted. With four men on each gun, one loading grapeshot, a second knocking the quoin out, a third aiming the gun, and the fourth yanking the lanyard, the remaining four guns along the side fired off in just a few seconds. Underneath the gun smoke, Wyckham saw two of the big Draesh fall into the sea, their bodies splattered with bloody holes. As the same time, much of *Cornelie's* port-side rigging broke loose, having been weakened first by *Righteous's* guns and then carried overboard by ten tonnes of falling demons. Her spanker gaff crashed down on the poop deck, striking both her helmsmen, and the ship turned into the wind and lost way—turning her vulnerable stern to face *Righteous* again!

Lieutenant Rawlins had risen from behind the protection of the mainmast step and was already putting matters back together. "Righteous, back on deck and man your guns! Bosuns, get the gun crews moving! The big monsters are all done for, and the Frenchie's showing us her backside!"

Bosuns blew their whistles and swung their rope starters, but the crew needed no encouragement. The men recognized the turning point in the battle and rushed back to their guns. Within a minute, the starboard guns were swabbed clean, wormed out, rammed with powder and double roundshot, and were being hauled back out through the gunports.

*Cornelie's* stern chasers fired again, bouncing two nine-pound balls off the main deck, one of which obliterated the head of a crewman standing by his gun. The headless body stood there for a moment, its neck stump a red fountain, before it folded in on itself and collapsed to the deck. Loblolly boys immediately scampered to get the headless corpse below. While it was horrible to see, crewmen getting their heads blown off was a gruesome part of naval war, one that both officers and men had seen before. He was proud to see that his experienced crew simply kept at their stations. Wyckham especially could not react in front of the crew and remained motionless, his hands clasped behind his back and his chin up. *Forget it, Wyckham. Just keep up the fight.*

The last gun bumped up to the gunwale with a thump, and its crew turned to Lieutenant Clifton. "Ready! Fire!" he shouted, and the sixteen guns fired off as crisp a broadside as any captain could ask for. Hit by all thirty-two of the big iron balls, splinters erupted on *Cornelie* from its stern to its bow. All her sails were shredded, and dozens of broken French bodies spun and fell over their guns. *Righteous's* gun crews jumped to their own guns while they were still rolling back. In another minute they'd be loaded, and *Cornelie* would be ripped again. With both ships now dead in the water, they could do this all day.

Wyckham was rubbing the pain out of his bruised rib when he saw him—William Jarvis, overdressed in his ornately gilded uniform, crouching for protection behind *Cornelie's* mizzenmast step like the coward he was. British officers in a fight were supposed to take punishment with the rest of the crew, not duck like waterfowl. Boiling anger again welled up inside Wyckham at the sight of the man who had caused all this death and destruction. He was not going to allow the man to live a minute longer.

"Corporal, your musket, if I may?" he said to a nearby marine as he extended his left hand.

"Aye, sor!" the puzzled red-coated marine responded as he handed the weapon to his captain.

Wyckham would have preferred a rifle, but *Cornelie's* stern had drifted well within musket range. He knelt and rested the heavy .75-caliber Brown Bess musket on the starboard railing and pulled back the hammer until it clicked at full cock. And now Jarvis, taking advantage of the momentary lull as *Righteous* reloaded her guns, stood up and looked around, presenting Wyckham with a full target. His corpulent body filled the musket's sights. He was a dead man.

"Cease firing! Cease firing! She's struck!" It was Rawlins calling out to the crew. Someone aboard *Cornelie* had cut the line to her flags, and both the gold-and-white Bourbon banner of Royalist France and the pennant bearing the Jarvis coat of arms had come fluttering down. Just in time to save the ship from a second brutal broadside and Jarvis from a ball in his chest.

*Dammit!* Maybe he should shoot the bastard anyway? His finger hesitated on the trigger, knowing that the proper thing to do was to put the weapon down, but his furious hatred for the man was still raging inside. Then Jarvis noticed Wyckham aiming at him. His face contorted in fear, and he dropped down to the cover of the deck like a common infantryman. Wyckham's chance was gone.

"Congratulations, Captain," said Rawlins as he walked over. "A victory!" Gun crews stood up and relaxed, surveying the damage they had caused to the other frigate. Wyckham's frustration faded with the thrill of victory. While *Cornelie's* deck was a shambles, Wyckham was already planning how to patch her up and sail the frigate back to Port Wyckham to become a part of his growing squadron.

But how was *Leviathan* faring? Wyckham tried to see how the fight was going between the two big ships of the line. It was hard to tell with *Cornelie* blocking his view. But the steady rattle of musketry and clanging of cold steel, clearly audible now that there was no artillery going off, told of a fierce deck fight in progress between two ships grappled together.

*Damn it all!* Rather than stand off and pound the *Trinidad* with his superior artillery, Badoin had foolishly grappled and boarded.

Probably some French thing, had to conquer the foe face-to-face and all that. But now, Badoin had to not only deal with the *Trinidad's* normal crew of seven hundred, but the extra hundreds of marines she'd taken on for the attack on the port.

"No celebration right now, Mister Rawlins. Let's get some canvas aloft. I expect our French revolutionary friend would appreciate some *Anglaise* assistance right now."

Rawlins looked over the starboard rail, immediately realized the situation, and bellowed out, "*Righteous*, we're off to help *Leviathan*! Main and fore tops'ls!"

Crewmen jumped to the sheets and climbed onto the yards. Sails were set and *Righteous* gained steerage way, edged past *Cornelie*, and turned back toward the fight aboard the *Trinidad*.

"Midshipman Moore!" Wyckham called out. The fifteen-year-old "young gentleman" looked up from the starboard battery. "Take a prize crew over to the French frigate, if you would," Wyckham yelled down to him.

With an "Aye, Captain" and a big grin, the young man sprinted to get the ship's barge over the side and manned. Wyckham hated to lose the youth's sword fighting skills in the coming deck fight aboard the *Trinidad*, but as senior midshipman, he was entitled to the command of *Cornelie*, now a prize ship. "Include one of Schecter's mates." *Cornelie* clearly would have many wounded in need of a surgeon's assistant.

But just as *Righteous* started to pick up speed, the ship shook and heeled to port. Now what? Shite, he knew what it was! This had happened to *Righteous* before—it was one of the giant Draesh was climbing up the side! Wyckham rushed to the port side, and there it was, bleeding from a gash on its head, but with foot-long teeth bared in a snarl and ready to strike! *Christ, a damned Draesh is aboard!* Just what Wyckham had tried to avoid.

The fearsome thing's head came over the starboard gunwales, noticed Wyckham, and turned right toward him. Terrific. He'd be the first to be eaten. Wyckham just stood there, awaiting his fate, since there was no time to get away. Besides that, Royal Navy officers did not run from a foe—he would certainly not show fear in front of the

crew. But just as the huge monster was reaching a long arm out for him, an immense open jaw with even longer teeth exploded from the water and grabbed the monster's right leg. A second one followed and clamped on to the Draesh's other leg. Damned if it wasn't two of those gargantuan whales that had been guiding *Righteous*, and they yanked the big demon right off the ship! The falling monster made a resounding thump and a geyser of seawater as it was hauled back into the sea. The wtarers about *Righteous* quickly turned red, but not a single body part surfaced. It appeared from all the splashing that a whole pod of whales was below, and they had very quickly swallowed every bit of the evil beast. Wyckham was glad that the whales ate the damned thing. It was only fitting that the big demon got devoured while trying to eat him and his crew. *Enjoy the dinner party, you rotting swine!*

Wyckham kept staring down, but there was nothing more to see. Apparently the whales' meal was over. Finally, several whales surfaced to make celebratory splashes, and damned if the same one that had winked at him before did it again! *Well, I'm certainly glad you're attracted to me*, thought Wyckham. *You've saved the day. But I'm sorry that my aristocrat father would never approve our relationship going any further.*

*Righteous's* helmsman had the ship ready to bump up to the big French liner's unengaged port side. Wyckham called out to the crew, "Ready grappling hooks, lads, but keep it quiet!" It might be possible that they could achieve a measure of surprise. Wyckham had seen it happen before, when the din and chaos of a ship in a deck fight kept it from seeing a second ship approach and board. Even if a vigilant lookout called out a warning, it was hard for his calls to be heard in the fighting on the deck below.

None of the *Trinidad's* great guns were fired at them as they approached. Maybe her crew was fully engaged with *Leviathan's* boarders and no one had seen them coming? His own crewmen threw the grappling lines with the big hooks, their mates jumped to haul them in, and the gun crews left their cannons to grab pistols and cutlasses from the arms locker. Marine Captain McConnell barked orders, and red-coated marines formed a line up on the forecastle, readying their muskets. Wyckham's steward, Obujimi, handed him his Nock rifled

pistols and strapped on his Moroccan sword. Then the African valet carefully removed his own powdered wig and placed it gently on a quarterdeck post. Then he pulled out a strap of leopard skin and tied it around his head in the traditional crown of African royalty. Before he was abducted years ago by Arab slavers, he had been a prince of the Zulus and had often led their fearsome *impis* into battle.

Finally, he picked up four of the eight-foot pikes, his preferred weapon, put two in each hand, and took a protective position in front of Wyckham. Both men now prepared for battle, they headed for the starboard entry port.

*Righteous* bumped up against the big three-decker towering over her, grappling hooks were thrown, and the two ships were hauled together. Wyckham and Obujimi quietly scrambled up her side along with the first wave of crewmen. They climbed over her port gunwales to view a scene of utter chaos and destruction.

Badoin's sixty-five-pound carronades had been devastating at close range. Firing down the length of the ship, they had shredded everything on the main deck, including a lot of crewmen. Half the great guns were overturned, corpses and moaning wounded were everywhere, and blood was running out the scuppers in torrents. Over on the starboard side, the two French crews were fighting each other on the deck in a frenzied melee.

An unusual aspect of this deck fight was the presence of aliens sprinkled among Badoin's crew, about a dozen ants and a few mudmen. *Leviathan* had needed crewmen after the big battle seven months ago to replace both her fallen and those Frenchmen who elected to return home. While most aliens were unsuited for shipboard life, ants turned out to be excellent for gun crews, strong and enduring. But Wyckham had been puzzled by the mudmen Badoin had taken aboard. What the hell could they do aboard ship?

Now he saw the mudmen put to good use. There were around a half dozen of them, rolling across the deck, with groups of Badoin's revolutionaries crouched behind them. Every second or two, a crewman would jump out, fire a freshly reloaded pistol or two, and then leap back behind the protective bulk of the mudman. Wyckham watched a

mudman take a ball as wet mud on its body splashed to the deck, but the separated bits of mud quickly rejoined the bulk of its owner, and the unharmed alien continued its steady progress. And it was a deadly advance. It had rolled over and absorbed so many foes that a dozen hands and feet of suffocated Frenchmen protruded from its surface.

The *Trinidad's* officers had been too busy commanding the fight against *Leviathan's* crew to watch for a second boarding. *Righteous's* crew had achieved complete surprise. The first wave of English sailors was able to sneak up behind many of the white-uniformed Royalist marines and stab with their cutlasses and dirks. A dozen Frenchmen fell before they realized what was happening, and as they turned to face the new threat, Harrison's marines let go with a volley of musketry. Through the smoke, Wyckham watched another dozen white coats drop to the blood-splattered deck.

Now there was no reason for silence, and the British sailors were yelling "*Righteous!*" and hurrahing like hell, as British sailors were taught to do in their relentless small-arms drills. Along with all the shouting, the British sailors fired off a rolling volley of pistols. Since most of the French had been unable to reload their own pistols in the hand-to-hand fight, all the British sailors had to do was back off behind their pike-wielding mates and shoot point blank into the packed foes.

But there were still plenty of wild, sword-waving Royalist sailors and marines on the deck, shouting "*Vive le roi!*" with typical French bravado, and now they all seemed to be running toward the newly arrived attackers. Even though the *Trinidad's* personnel had already suffered serious losses fighting *Leviathan*, this deck fight was far from decided. With the extra marines the *Trinidad* had taken aboard for the assault on Port Wyckham, it still had plenty of men, and it seemed all of them were full of fight and facing Wyckham.

Wyckham fired off his two pistols into the charging French, dropping a yelling mustachioed marine, and then drew his sword. While for most of his life he had never been much with a blade, for the past several months he'd taken daily instruction from Midshipman Moore, the young man who had shown his skill with a blade in the earlier fight for Draez. Now he'd get to test his new skills. Hopefully, all that formal

fencing training would give him some practical help in this messy deck scrap and not just get him killed thinking about the correct parry.

A smiling officer stepped forward from the line of French sailors. “*Tres bon, zee famous Anglaise capitaine ’eemself.*” By the look of his uniform, it was the French flag captain, and by the sneer in his voice, it was another arrogant fop out to kill Wyckham. *Christ Almighty, where do all these vicious idiot noblemen come from? They even follow me to other planets!* The man’s uniform was so embroidered in gold trim that he looked like the royal box at the Paris Opera House. “On your garde, monsieur,” he warned Wyckham as he saluted and came *en garde*, leveling his blade to point at Wyckham’s neck. “We shall ’ve ay bout gallant, non?”

*Hmphh!* Wyckham returned the salute and crouched into the low *en garde* stance that he had learned from Moore—knees deeply bent, trailing hand high with palm up for balance, point high and outside in *quarte*. He quickly ran his eyes over his opponent, seeing a man brimming with confidence. Certainly, Jarvis would have told him of Wyckham’s poor skills with the sword, and he was expecting an easy victory. Well, wasn’t he in for a surprise.

His foe was tall, about thirty-five, obviously athletic and fit, and comfortable in fencing position. He used the fast, small sword favoured by the French nobility. Wyckham would need to get ahead in each phrase with his longer and heavier Moroccan blade. A missed parry would leave him wide open if this crapaud used his long reach and was skillful with his lighter blade. It would be a contest of Wyckham’s greater strength and foot speed versus the Frenchman’s quicker and more skillful hand.

The Frenchman made a quick advance and pressed Wyckham’s blade. Wyckham retreated a step and freed his blade with a *disengage* back to *quarte*. The Frenchman advanced again and made a crude beat in *sixte*, momentarily knocking Wyckham’s blade wide. Wyckham disengaged and retreated again, only to have the damned crapaud go for his blade again in *sixte*, still making no serious attack. What the hell was he up to? He must be setting Wyckham up for something.

“La Meson du Bourbon!” The plan became clear as four French sailors with cutlasses yelling “House of Bourbon” leaped at Wyckham

from both left and right. *A gallant fight, ’ey?* The Frenchman’s plan all along had been to bind Wyckham’s blade while these crewmen jumped him. And it looked as if it was going to work, too; if he turned to face the attacking crewmen for even a second, this long French captain would skewer him quickly.

The two French crewmen on the left were just about upon him. As Wyckham stepped to his right, a pike flew into the first one’s chest, and he fell forward with a groan. It was his steward, Obujimi, come to his rescue! He had already grabbed a second pike and was now advancing, yelling a blood-curdling “*Ukuphonsa! Ukuphonsa!*” which was enough to freeze the second Frenchman for a moment.

Obujimi had been a prince of his tribe in Africa before his abduction by Arab slavers, and from childhood, he had received extensive training in spear throwing for both warfare and hunting. With a feint to the left, he got the second man to jump back out of distance, then he cocked his arm and swung the pike’s shaft at the two on his right. That momentarily stopped them both, giving the African the split second he needed to pull the weapon back, advance, and plant his feet just like a fencer. Then he lunged to thrust the pike’s steel tip deep into the chest of the one nearest him. Even before the impaled Frenchman could fall, the ferocious valet wrenched his pike free, recocked his arm, and thrust again up into the second man’s jaw, knocking his head back as the point lodged in his skull. Both men fell, but before they even hit the ground, Obujimi advanced again and aimed another thrust back at the remaining man on Wyckham’s left. Coming to the wise decision that the House of Bourbon wasn’t worth fighting a crazed Zulu warrior for, he chose discretion over valor and hurriedly retreated back into the Royalists’ line.

Obujimi then turned to Wyckham’s opponent and cocked his arm to throw the pike at the surprised French captain. His death was a moment away. But Wyckham wanted this bastard for himself, this officer who had made a mockery of the code of chivalry concerning officers in battle. Deckhands were commoners, never exposed to any decency, and were even encouraged to fight savagely. But one officer did not call out another one-on-one and then spring an ambush.



“Thank you, Obujimi, a most impressive bit of work,” he said out of the side of his mouth, not taking his eye off his foe for a second. “But I owe this man the ‘gallant bout’ he’s requested. A gentleman like him deserves no less. Only a whoreson would fight like a street thug with a gang of cutthroats.”

With that, the French captain’s smile evaporated.

Angrily, Wyckham feinted a lunge in low *tierce*, recovered forward, moved his point to *quarte*, and lunged for real. The Frenchman managed a half-step retreat, leaned backward to increase distance, and made a circling counterparry in *sixte*. His parry guided Wyckham’s blade past his shoulder. For a moment, he held the attacking blade, then made a lightning riposte to Wyckham’s chest in *sixte*. Wyckham managed to make a desperate circling counterparry in *quarte* across his body, but it pushed the Frenchman’s point across his waistcoat. Just a scratch, but another inch closer and Wyckham would have sustained a serious wound. *Shite, but this crapaud has a quick hand. Even when leaning backward!* He was probably the bastard son from some count’s dalliance with a scullery maid, grew up with practice foils in his playpen, and began fencing lessons when he was four.

But this French officer’s footwork couldn’t compare to Wyckham’s. His was typically French, formal and measured, not the athletic style with its low crouch that Wyckham had learned from Moore. Wyckham’s strategy was clear. No way would he close and fight it out in a contest of bladework. He would make direct attacks from distance, taking advantage of his long lunge, then recover back immediately, keeping away from his foe’s practiced hand. With his longer Moroccan blade and deeper lunge, he should be able to reach two or three inches farther than the Frenchman. And with enough attacks, one was bound to hit, and two or three inches of steel in the right place was all it would take.

He started bobbing on his toes, moving from side to side, occasionally feinting a lunge with a stamp of his leading foot. His opponent made small steps, keeping his distance and waiting for the real attack. Suddenly Wyckham found himself close enough, and his training took over. He stamped to his left and then lunged to the right at the Frenchman’s groin in *octave*. This time the foe had to lean even

farther back, but he managed a sweeping parry through *quinte* and then flicked his point down toward Wyckham’s momentarily exposed back. But the blade just found air; Wyckham had again retreated by the time it arrived.

*But I almost got through,* realized Wyckham. *If I appear to be repeating that attack, he’ll have to respect it and probably make the same parry.* His speed had surprised the older man. All the footwork drills had thickened Wyckham’s thighs; Moore even nicknamed him “Balista” on the practice piste for his explosive lunge, comparing him to the spear-launching artillery of ancient Rome. He would use that speed now.

Normally this French officer didn’t retreat from simple attacks, wanting to stay in range for the quick *riposte*. But on that last attack, Wyckham had pressed him, and he’d had to lean back to get more space to parry, getting slightly off-balance. If Wyckham could just dance or feint to get a few inches closer before lunging, he’d get in range and force the Frenchman off balance for a deadly thrust.

He repeated the same preparation, dancing left and starting back to his right. Sure enough, the big frog officer leaned back just a touch, anticipating the final attack. But Wyckham recovered forward, feinting the same attack to *octave*, watching for his opponent’s hand to start upward. Now falling backward, the Frenchman had no choice but to again sweep his body with the parry up into *quinte*. But as soon as his blade started to move, Wyckham flicked his own point upright in a lightning *coupé* to let the enemy’s blade go by. Looking up from his low crouch, he saw a lot of exposed neck. He flicked his point back down and lunged for it, his legs pushing least five inches of steel right into the Frenchman’s jugular.

The French captain froze, his sword high from his missed parry, looking like a statue in Saint James Park. Blood bubbled down Wyckham’s blade to cascade off its double kidney guard. He pulled the blade free as the French captain crumbled to the deck in a heap, his puzzled eyes staring at Wyckham as he went down. But the British captain felt no sorrow for this foe. He’d come here to threaten this world and endanger many others, including his own Earth. And worse than that, he’d violated the accepted code for fighting among officers! *Hmphh!* So much for bastards who plan ambushes like some savage in America!

Another crash of musketry from right over Wyckham's head told him that *Righteous's* marines had also boarded the big French ship and formed up on deck. More Frenchman fell, and the others stepped back to show a deck covered with their wounded mates.

That was enough for Admiral Villeneuve. His ship had been close-raked four times, his new fleet captain lay mortally wounded, and now a shipload of *Anglaise* had boarded his ship. The five Draesh on his ship, which should have easily won any deck fight, had run early on. Claiming they were going to climb up on *Leviathan* and smash all its crew, they had leaped overboard. But apparently it had been an excuse to swim away, because once they hit the water, they completely disappeared. Villeneuve had no idea that they were all now residing in the stomachs of some angry whales.

So it was time to surrender the ship and end the bloodshed in this hellish place he'd been tricked into attacking. With a cut of his sword, he severed the line for raising the flag on the mainmast, and the white Royalist banner came fluttering down to the deck. "We've struck!" Villeneuve shouted. "Sons of France, you must surrender. Drop your weapons. You fought with great valor today, but we are outnumbered. You may surrender with honor."

Weapons clanged and rattled to the deck as the sailors of the *Trinidad* raised their empty hands. Villeneuve spotted Wyckham and walked over, intending to offer his sword to the English captain. He stopped, bowed stiffly, and spoke. "Monsieur Capitaine, Admiral Pierre Charles Jean Baptiste Silvestre de Villeneuve. The ship is yours," he said formally and offered his sword, pommel first.

Villeneuve? The fool who had so poorly commanded the French fleet at Trafalgar was now here, trying to destroy the universe? Apparently the stories of his suicide were false; instead, he'd come here to try to take this world for Royalist France. Wyckham was disgusted with the man. And he knew exactly how to pay him back for all the trouble he'd caused.

"Thank you, Admiral, but it was not my English ship that crossed your bow and raked your ship to near destruction. You must surrender to the man who vanquished you, Capitaine Jean Badoin, the Sea Eagle,

capitaine of the French ship of the line *Leviathan*," he said to the admiral, using the crass nickname Badoin was so proud of.

Villeneuve bristled, as Wyckham knew he would. He stepped closer to Wyckham. "Captain, unlike you and me, this man is a peasant revolutionary and a traitor to his country," he replied in a low tone. "You should not ask me surrender to this egotistical commoner who threatens my way of life as well as yours. Captain, please, accept my weapon."

Wyckham kept his hands clasped behind his back, unresponsive, letting Villeneuve stand there with his sword out. After a few embarrassing moments for the admiral, Wyckham turned to face Lieutenant Rawlins. "You get the bugger's sword and hand it to Badoin," he said under his breath. "If he refuses, take the goddamned thing from that arrogant imbecile any way you like."

Rawlins approached Villeneuve, nodded, and extended his hand. Villeneuve refused to surrender to a mere lieutenant and withdrew the weapon. Rawlins called to Greaves, *Righteous's* chief bosun and a man not to be trifled with. "Mister Greaves, could you please relieve this man of his weapon?"

"Aye, sor!" Greaves said with a grin as he presented himself to Villeneuve, coiled his body, and delivered quite a kick to the arrogant admiral's groin. The admiral's tongue exploded from his open mouth and his eyes bugged out like a rockfish brought to the surface. He doubled over, barely staying upright on his tottering legs. Greaves grabbed the sword and then gave Villeneuve a gentle push to complete the miserable man's final descent to the deck, landing on his ample *derriere*. Then he handed the sword to Rawlins, who walked over and gave it to Captain Badoin.

Now it was time for Wyckham to recruit a few hands for his new ships, or at least send some Royalists back home with serious doubts about coming to Draez again.

"Sailors of France," he spoke out loudly in the French he had learned as a youth at Haversham, the school he and Rawlins had attended. "Gallant foes." He slowly turned and looked men in the eye. "Welcome to Draez. As you can see"—he gestured to Badoin and his French crewmen—"this is a place where French and English put



aside their past differences and reap the fruit of the planet together.” He turned back to face Villeneuve. “Yet this disgraced admiral, Pierre Villeneuve, the failed commander of French forces at Trafalgar, brings you here to kill and imprison both English and his own countrymen, promising victory over evil and untold wealth for each of you.

“Well, he was correct on one count,” he continued, turning about, looking as many men in the eye as possible. “It is true that this planet is awash in gold for the benefit of its residents. Any French sailor who stays here and sails with me in our fight against real evil can return home laden with gold whenever he chooses. The longer you stay, the richer you will be. But I warn you, once you sample the taverns on this world, you may find it difficult to leave!”

The deck quieted down, and faces brightened among the defeated French crew. “I ask you to forget your hatred of the Englishmen and revolutionary Frenchmen here and join us in fighting the evil giants you have seen,” Wyckham continued. “They wish to eat you all.” Many of the *Trinidad*’s crew nodded at that. Mayhap the Draesh onboard had already dined on a few Frenchmen? “They have plans to go to Earth and do the same there. If they are successful, they will devour everyone on Earth. Everyone. Every member of your families, every one of your friends, every person you know. For now, I suggest you return with your ship to our city, where you can experience the hospitality of Port Wyckham’s taverns. Then make your decisions as to your course of action.”

“*Oui, oui!*” and other positive exclamations filled the air. He’d won them over. The squadron had the new crewmen it needed.

Rawlins spoke out clearly to Badoin. “A great victory for France, Capitaine, as well as for England and our entire planet Earth.”

Both crews went wild with glee, the defeated French sailors cheering just as loudly as the victorious Brits. Most likely the French crew was still thinking about the earlier invitation to the taverns. But without a doubt, it was Villeneuve who seemed the Frenchman most in need of a drink, whimpering on the deck while rubbing his groin.

Finally the day was done, the victory complete. Now Wyckham and Badoin had to repair the two French ships enough for the trip home. Badoin took over matters on the *Trinidad*, with its wounded to care for

and dead to remove. After that, the ship would have to be cleaned up and jury rigged with some temporary sails. *Leviathan*’s big sixty-five-pound carronades had devastated the ship’s forecastle, severing sheets and stays. It would be a while before she could sail.

With repairs underway on the French two-decker, Wyckham needed to return to his prize, *Cornelie*, and hopefully win over its French crew with more of his persuasive oratory. And then he would have to deal with William Jarvis, the man at the root of all this mayhem. Right now, Wyckham was so angry at his old admiral that he had no idea what he might do. Maybe he’d just lose all control and run the man through without uttering a single word. God knew the universe would be better off without him around.

But it turned out that his encounter with Jarvis would be postponed. As he stepped back aboard *Righteous*, Lieutenant Clifton informed him that he was not needed aboard the captured French frigate. Moore had sent over a note from *Cornelie* stating that her crew was docile and working; all he needed was *Righteous*’s carpenter sent over with the enclosed list of materials. Wyckham could see Jones, the ship’s carpenter, loading some canvas and spars into the cutter and getting ready to shove off for the crippled frigate with two of his carpenter’s mates. All this was fine with Wyckham. He could play Mark Anthony to the French frigate’s crew at a later time. What he really wanted right now was to go below to his cabin for rest and a glass.

*Righteous*’s deck was being returned to order; the wounded had been taken below, and sailors were picking up all the grapeshot rolling about. Carpenter Jones would get to the more serious repairs later, such as repairing the carriage for the dismounted gun forward and patching up the deck where *Cornelie*’s one broadside had struck. But first he was needed aboard *Cornelie* to get her jury-rigged and sailing again.

Midshipman Simmons came up from the orlop below with the butcher’s bill—six dead and eight wounded. Three more corpses and eight more wounded were coming back aboard from the *Trinidad*’s deck. Fortunately none were officers or warrants; those were hard men to replace—a callous thought, but one a Royal Navy captain must consider after any fight.

Thomas Obujimi, his ever-attentive steward, walked up, carefully putting his white wig back on. His greatcoat and stockings were perfectly clean despite his recent hand-to-hand fighting, whereas Wyckham's clothes were covered in powder stains and splattered with French blood. It always baffled Wyckham how the man could stay impeccably attired at all times, even after a desperate deck fight.

"No need for your presence on deck any longer, is there, sir? Might I suggest we get you below for a sponge and some clean clothes? And maybe a brandy while I attend to your toilet?" Say what you want about the man, he could read Wyckham's mind better than a Firefly. And thank God for the man's fighting skills. Without them, Wyckham would have been hacked to bits on *Trinidad's* deck. But he did have a question for the man.

"First of all, forgive me for the late acknowledgement—demands on a captain's time and all that—but my most sincere thanks for your timely intervention on my behalf in the fighting aboard the *Trinidad*. But I must inquire—what was it you yelled when you stuck those French sailors with your pike?"

"It was 'okuphonsa,' sir. Okuphonsa is a deadly poison that Zulu warriors tip their spears with. Simply shouting the word often causes our enemies to flee." Obujimi hesitated, considering something. Then he spoke. "An old habit of mine, a bit rude, actually. One I should probably discontinue."

"You should have no regrets on your conduct in this battle, my good man. You fear you were rude? Rude was that ambush they sprang on me, something beneath even a French officer." He started to ask if Obujimi had actually tipped his pikes with a poison, then decided not to. The Royal Navy certainly did not stoop to the use of poison, and if one of his men had used some, he didn't want to know. But he did make a note to check with the surgeon on the progress of the French sailors Obujimi had stabbed.

Wyckham issued final orders to Rawlins about giving the hands a meal and a well-earned extra tot of grog; God knows they had earned it. Once below, Obujimi removed his boots and gave them a quick brushing while Wyckham sat back sipping a French brandy. Though he

was exhausted, he had to feel good about the victory. Over the past two days, his force had defeated an overwhelming French invasion force allied with the Draesh. Lady Brashton's fears had been put to rest; the Draesh fleet hadn't been planning to return to Draez after all. Instead they had tried using a French fleet to do their work for them, but once again, British Navy tactics and discipline had won the day. He'd get to return to his gentleman's life back in Port Wyckham after all, though his squadron would have to remain here another day or two until the two French ships were seaworthy. While it would take some work to get the damaged ships ready to sail, there would be plenty of time for some well-deserved rest, decent meals, and a few glasses.



9

## SOME SURPRISING VISITORS

“**S**ah!” Crash! The marine sentry bashed his brass-wrapped musket stock on the floor outside Wyckham’s cabin, jolting him awake from the doze he’d apparently dropped into. “Midshipman Simmons, sah!”

“Ah...yes...come,” he responded, getting his thoughts in order.

The youngster could hardly talk, he was so nervous. “Mister Rawlins’s compliments, sir, and the cutter from *Scamp* is approaching. Coc’sun showing five fingers,” he finally managed to spit out.

*Jesus, five fingers?* The coxswain of any boat bearing officers or important visitors to a ship would hold up one to five fingers, telling the ship’s watch the proper size side party to assemble to pipe his passengers aboard. Five fingers meant an admiral was in the boat! Bloody hell, he must have been one of the passengers aboard *Scamp* that had come back from Earth! Why the hell hadn’t Commander Randolph signaled him?

Well, that didn’t matter now. He needed to get himself fully awake right quick. *Damn, probably shouldn’t have had that third brandy.* And he needed to get out of the clothes that he still wore, they were covered

in the filth of battle. Thankfully, Obujimi appeared with a steaming mug of coffee, a basin of warm water, fresh stockings, a waistcoat, and his freshly brushed captain's coat. Wyckham could hear the side party piping the visitors aboard as he completed his toilet.

Finally he climbed up to the main deck to see about twenty well-dressed Englishmen, some navy officers and even an Anglican bishop milling about forward, with Lieutenants Rawlins and Clifton in attendance. Christ, it was a delegation of all sorts of dignitaries, who doubtlessly thought themselves quite important. The Firefly leader had returned as well, in her usual image of Lady Brashton, and was standing just a few feet away at the foot of the quarterdeck stairs. Wyckham was glad she was back. She would be very helpful in explaining everything to whatever knobs he now had to put up with. The energy being had created a very attractive blue dress for her image, with big puffy sleeves, white lace cuffs, and collar, and crowned with an elegant blue velvet hat. Wyckham had never seen her in anything like it. The Firefly must have seen it in the minds of one of the newcomers and copied the image onto herself.

But he didn't approve of another aspect of the Firefly's appearance—she had reduced the size of her breasts! When she first came aboard *Righteous* months ago, she had seen the eighteen-pound roundshot in racks about the deck and had adopted their size as models for the image she projected. That and her long, flowing hair had made for lots of jokes on the lower deck, where she was referred to as “the Roundshot Rapunzel” or “Madam Poonts.” Wyckham had been quite fond of her impressive prow, and he descended to her now to discover the reason for her new slimmer form.

“Welcome back, Lady Brashton. That's a very nice new frock you've created. But it seems to have less to cover. Might I ask what has caused your bowsprit to shrink?”

Of course, she was puzzled by his words and made no reply. Wyckham often forgot that his witticisms were wasted on her. None of the aliens had any sense of humor or appreciation of metaphor. But he knew how to get a smile from a Firefly.

He'd just give her a good teat-squeeze! While a year ago, he would never have considered groping a female image in public, the months

spent on Freeport had upended almost all his beliefs in British propriety. And after the desperate and nearly continuous fighting he'd been involved in for almost an entire day, he was entitled to a little fun! Besides, the alien before him certainly wouldn't mind, Fireflies were eager for any suggestion of foreplay.

The two of them were hidden from view by a stack of supplies going over to *Cornelie*. No one could see them. He ran his right hand over her chest, actually having trouble finding anything through the tight material, just like that time years ago when the real Lady Brashton had allowed him a little exploring after a few drinks at the Admiralty ball. “Madam, I must say that you are sending me superbly accurate feelings of what the real Lady Brashton would have felt like. Most impressive bit of work, though I do miss the...ah...fantasy you usually carry around between your shoulders.” He continued to massage her chest, his thoughts returning to the one night at the officer's ball when the real Tracy Brashton had let him get this far.

The Firefly moaned softly and grabbed his hand, rubbing it harder across herself. “Oh, yes, Rodney, yes!” she spoke slowly with her eyes closed in rapture, acting just like the real Tracy Brashton did. Fireflies had studied human female reactions to sex and could mimic their passions quite well.

Footsteps made Wyckham look to his left, and he received a bewildering shock. Because there he saw a second form of Lady Brashton, standing there with a smile and nodding her head in approval. Now another Firefly had taken the form of Lady Brashton? Well, this one had the large breasts he was so fond of, and they were on display in a daringly low bodice. Wyckham reached out to them as well, rubbing the second pair with his left hand. Ah, this was what the life of a planet's ruler should be like!

But damned if the first Firefly didn't take offense! Her eyes went wide, and she spluttered a bit, apparently having difficulty speaking, she was so surprised and distraught. Finally she managed to blurt out, “And just what in God's name is this...this...abomination, this...harlot, this creature stealing my appearance?”

The second woman responded, “I'm sorry for your confusion. It must be difficult enough to arrive on another planet and immediately

encounter a vision of yourself. Let me explain. I am not a real human but a bundle of energy known here as a Firefly. Because Captain Wyckham had such fond memories of you, I adopted this form to reassure him of our peaceful intentions, as well as to facilitate sexual congress. If you like, I can show you some of the sexual activities and positions he enjoys. Hopefully, this would prove helpful to you in bedding him, something I know you have been unable to do. I've also studied his memories of your parlor tricks and social maneuvering, how effectively you were able to manipulate the men about you in your society. That has been very helpful in achieving Crawfordation for what we needed to do here."

The second Lady Brashton's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. "My what?...Social manipulations?...Parlor tricks?" That was it for her. She cocked her elbow back and thrust her fingers toward the second woman's eyes, but they only passed through the electrical image of the Firefly in front of her. "God damn it!" she cursed in a most unladylike fashion. Immediately she cooled off a bit and muttered to herself, "So Jarvis was not insane after all." Frustrated by her inability to scratch the woman's eyes out, she turned to Wyckham and struck him smartly on his left cheek.

Oh, Christ, could it be? Either the Fireflies had perfected the sending of pain messages, or this was the real Tracy Brashton of his past, newly arrived here as a passenger aboard *Scamp*. Speechless, Wyckham rubbed his jaw and watched his assailant spin and walk back toward the rest of the group gathered on the forecastle. There she was greeted by a tall, elegantly dressed man in the party that had just come aboard. The two spoke animatedly, with the man occasionally looking back angrily at Wyckham.

*Bloody hell, it couldn't be!* But it was him all right. Baron Sir Edward Kemp, the man who had married Tracy Brashton. Which meant that the woman he had just crudely groped was not a massless energy being but the real Baroness Tracy Brashton Kemp! And as the real Tracy Brashton was wont to do, she had already begun a social offensive, and he was the target. Clearly she was persuading her husband that Wyckham had just publicly groped her, despite the fact that, surprisingly, she had

clearly enjoyed what had gone on. Why of all people had she and her husband come here? What in hell was going on?

Rawlins called everyone's attention to Wyckham's arrival. "Aha, the victor himself!" And he directed the entire party back to meet him. Leading the group, besides Baron and Baroness Kemp, were a short, well-dressed young man and an admiral of the red in full dress uniform. While he didn't recognize the first gentleman, every man in the British Navy, from the lowest tar to the highest officers, knew the tall, red-headed Irish admiral next to him. It was none other than Thomas Cochrane, Earl of Dundonald and Lord of the Admiralty.

Cochrane had been a legendary Royal Navy frigate captain throughout the Napoleonic wars. With just one ship, he had terrorized the northern coast of France, raiding towns, blowing up fortifications, and destroying semaphore stations. Napoleon was forced to deploy over ten thousand soldiers to the coast just to guard against Cochrane and his crew of three hundred. Earlier in his career, Cochrane had attacked the Spanish frigate *El Gamo*, 38 guns, with his sloop *Speedy*, 14. First he pounded her from under her stern where her guns couldn't depress, then took the frigate by boarding despite his crew being outnumbered six to one. Now, at age forty, he was a Member of Parliament, where he had made many Tory enemies by siding with the Whigs on all sorts of reforms. His political enemies managed to get him indicted for stock fraud, a dastardly and baseless charge in the view of the entire British Navy.

The crowd walked briskly back toward Wyckham, jockeying to be the first to speak with him. Some nobles were yelling, "King's business first!" while Cochrane angrily shouted, "This is first of all a Navy matter! All Tory fools step back!" Rawlins made a sign to Wyckham, looking skyward and shrugging his shoulders with his palms up, as if to say, "Rod, they're all yours now, thank God!"

The boisterous group surrounded him, each person yelling the reasons that Wyckham should hear him out first. Several men in merchant attire were yelling out, "A moment of your time, Captain! Untold riches await you!" Worst of all, Baron Kemp was shouting out, "A personal matter, sir!" But then it turned out that Kemp wasn't the worst of the bunch. At the back of the pack, shouting, "Family! For

God's sake, let his family through," was none other than the squire of North Tamerton and member of Lords himself, Alistair Wyckham—his father! And with him was Wyckham's useless brother, Chauncey.

Well, they were the last two persons Wyckham had ever wanted to see again. Alistair Wyckham had ignored his younger son all his life, instead lavishing attention and favours on his elder son, Chauncey. Wyckham had been left to make his own way in the navy, fighting the frogs and Jonathons, while the firstborn son, Chauncey, was introduced about London as the future squire of North Tamerton. There he spent his time in the clubs, living off a lavish stipend, gambling away huge sums, and becoming the top patron of all the brothels in Cheapside. Despite many publicized scandals, his father always stood by Chauncey, while he simply ignored Rodney. His father should have been proud that his second son was having a remarkable career in the Royal Navy, becoming its youngest post captain, but Alistair's only public comment about his younger son was that the navy had taught him to "swear like a commoner."

That comment had always stuck in Rodney Wyckham's craw. He had been wounded twice, fighting to keep the Mad Corsican from England's door, yet all his father worried about was improper language. One of the reasons Wyckham had elected to stay on Draez was to finally sever all ties to his snobbish and self-serving family.

But right now, Wyckham was overwhelmed by the chaotic situation and had no idea what to do first. He was a captain in the Royal Navy, not the experienced diplomat that was needed in this situation. On the other hand, Rawlins's father had included his son in his family's political activities, and seeing his captain's paralysis, the first lieutenant took charge of the introductions.

"Captain, may I introduce our visitors? *First*," he said with emphasis, "Lord Cochrane, earl of Dundonald and admiral of the red." Wyckham and Cochrane each showed a leg and nodded to each other. "And this is Robert Peel, MP from Dublin," Rawlins said as he introduced the young man next to Cochrane.

Yes, Peeler—Wyckham had heard of him. He was a rising star in Parliament, sponsored by none other than Arthur Wellesley himself, the

victorious Duke of Wellington. Peeler was best known for his impressive speechmaking and instituting a civil police force in Dublin known as the Peelers. In Parliament, his speeches had impressed both Commoners and Lords. Many expected him to be a future prime minister.

"And representing His Majesty's Office of Colonization, Baron Edward Kemp, with whom I believe you are acquainted," continued Rawlins.

Kemp burst out wildly, "Satisfaction! I demand satisfaction from this scoundrel!"

Pretending not to notice Kemp's rant, Rawlins quickly moved on to Alistair and Chauncey Wyckham and continued, "And look here, your beloved father and brother have come all this way to see you!" Rawlins had gone to public school with Wyckham and was well aware of his feelings toward his family.

His two family members smiled and returned his bow, the first time they had ever done that in their lives, both exclaiming how happy they were to see him alive. "By God, it's such a relief to see you healthy and thriving!" said his father. "Chauncey and I both feared you were lost in the channel last year. We were overwhelmed with grief for months."

"How wonderful—my dear family here on Draesh!" Wyckham said through a forced smile, barely keeping the sarcasm out of his voice. "My own father and brother risk all on a dangerous voyage to come check on my health." *Check on my wealth, the more likely.* Obviously they had heard of the planet governed by a family member that was filled with gold, and wanted to stick their dirty hands in the pie. "And of course I am just as delighted to see you," Wyckham managed to get out, when what he really wanted was to call some bosuns over and have them both thrown overboard.

Rawlins tried to continue introductions, but the merchants in the back were feeling ignored and started shoving forward, vying for attention. Finally, Wyckham realized he had to take charge of this mess. First thing to do was to get below with Cochrane, someone he trusted, and find out what the hell was going on.

"So glad to see all of you—such an impressive group of England's leaders," he managed to get out. "Certainly I will meet with you all in



good time. But navy business takes precedence, and I have a superior officer here, Admiral Cochrane, whom I expect has new orders for me. Lord Cochrane, shall we go to my cabin? And might I bring my other officers?" Wyckham had noticed Captain Randolph of *Vesuvius* and Commander Hamilton of *Scamp* in the crowd. It was important for them to hear what Cochrane had to say as well, especially since Rawlins would have to stay on deck to nursemaid the simmering worthies.

Over the shouted complaints of those left on deck, the group of navy officers descended the quarterdeck stairs to *Righteous*'s great cabin. Wyckham leaned over to the marine sentry on duty and spoke softly in his ear. "Corporal, I'd admire you keep the rest of that rabble above from coming down here, no matter what they say."

"Aye, sor!" he said, knuckling his forehead in salute and running back up the stairs, shouting, "You there! Back on th' deck! Cap'm sez no more viz'ters now! Back, oy sez!"

Obujimi appeared just as the group sat down at the large table in the cabin's center. "May I bring your guest anything? We do have some decent Bordeaux white just arrived, thanks to a timely delivery by the French Navy." Wyckham raised his eyebrows in appreciation. This was one efficient steward. He'd already pilfered the officers' lockers on the French ships and taken the best for *Righteous*'s own larder. "Or perhaps, after dealing with the gentlemen on deck, you need something stronger?" Obujimi continued. "Mayhap some of the American whiskey we still have left?"

That was a ridiculous question to put to Cochrane. Wyckham had never known an Irishman who preferred wine over spirits. "By God, sir," the admiral said to Wyckham, "Your man should be in Parliament! Has a quick grasp of a situation, he does." Cochrane turned to the steward. "I certainly do need a whiskey!" He took a glass from the steward and hoisted it toward Wyckham. "God save us from politicians, merchants, and most of all, our families!" and downed the whole thing before anyone else even had a glass.

Wyckham liked the man already.

"I beg your forgiveness for not waiting," Cochrane continued, "but I've been cooped up with that gaggle of flapping fowl for two days now,

and any sailor stuck with a group like that should not be denied drink for a moment." He turned back to Obujimi. "My most worthy fellow, another, if I may?"

Wyckham sipped only lightly at his glass. He'd need a clear head for dealing later with the mob above. First he had to hear the admiral's orders and inquiries, and then perhaps he could get his own list of questions addressed in preparation for dealing with the crowd up on deck.

"Admiral, welcome aboard *Righteous*. I'm sure you have many questions you would like answered, as I did when I first arrived here. Please feel free to ask about any matter you like, and I will do my best to answer."

"Aye, I've got many questions for you, but it'll take a long afternoon at your tavern here, which I've heard so much about, to set me straight. I believe it's more important for me to tell you all about this delegation of rogues you'll momentarily be dealing with and how they got here. I'm sure you are quite curious about all the goings-on.

"But before I go any further, let me explain something so to spare your commander Randolph a dressing down. It was I who asked him to avoid signaling you about my presence. Clearly I was a neophyte to the fighting on this world, and with you in the middle of a battle, I did not wish to burden you with any doubts about who was in command." He paused for another sip and looked into his glass. "Not bad—first decent thing the Yanks ever came up with."

Finally, Cochrane settled back and got started. "Seven months ago, Admiral Jarvis docks in Portsmouth with just two ships from his squadron, comes to London, and tells Admiralty an unbelievable tale. Says the squadron was whisked off to hell, where it was attacked by giant demons and seductive witches, all of them in league with you. After he conquers hell and fights off all the monsters, Jarvis says, he discovers gold there, over which you start a mutiny and try to kill him, but he escapes back to England. Not even the idiots at Admiralty believe him. They think he's completely daft and cashier him out. Last I hear, he's hanging around the London docks looking for a smuggler to take him to France."



He stopped for a long sip for his apparently parched throat. "Then, three months ago," he continued, "I hear from the governor in Portsmouth, Gerald Finn, an old friend. He tells me that one of his press gangs picked up three men who'd jumped ship. Navy rolls show them signed onto Jarvis's flagship *Zeus*. The three hands tell the provosts that they're now on *Righteous*, though that ship is on another world right now, and they're here on shore leave! And soon the brig *Scamp* will sail back through the heavens to pick them up, and then they'll all just fly back to *Righteous*. Finn reads the report and has a good laugh until he recalls Jarvis's tale, which he'd heard about from some staff lieutenant at Admiralty. So he sends the provosts around to figure matters out. What do they find but the three sailors' families are all suddenly wealthy. Some even have smelted gold bars in their homes. The governor hauls the three men before him, and they expand on the tale, describing another world at the center of a trading empire in the heavens, and the young Captain Rodney Wyckham sitting in its capital city, running the whole planet."

Another long sip. "So like a fool, I take the whole story to Number Ten. The PM thinks it's a joke until I drop a gold bar on his desk. That gets his attention. But what does Jenkinson do but take it to Whitehall? His Nibbs is of course overwhelmed and gets Parliament involved. Now it's a school of sharks at a feeding frenzy; they all want a big bite. The Crown, both Commons and Lords, the East India Company, the navy, all the London banks, the merchant guilds, Church of England—they all send delegations into the channel, following the three sailors in a cutter, waiting to board *Scamp* when she shows up. There must have been thirty ships tacking back and forth in the middle of the channel off Ushant. I was there for the navy on the frigate *Naiad*, 38, Captain Dundas, along with the pre-eminent MP's and business representatives, the sorry lot now here. We order most of the other fortune hunters back to London and try to keep order.

"Then, damned if *Scamp* doesn't arrive, falling out of a hole in the air and into the channel, smartly handled like she's done this before. She gets heaved to, and we all get onboard. But just as she hauls her wind and heads back toward one of the big square holes,

this French squadron shows up and also heads for a hole. Dundas tries to head them off with *Naiad*, but he gets pretty roughly handled by the *Trinidad*, and the frogs come here along with *Scamp*. The rest you know. I don't know whether Dundas survived. When I last glimpsed *Naiad*, her quarterdeck had been almost completely blown away. He was a solid officer and a refined gentleman."

Wyckham soberly pondered the whole story. *Christ, I should have known this would happen.* He'd told all the sailors who went back to visit to keep their gobs shut and avoid the Portsmouth taverns. Clearly some hadn't. Now he had every powerful faction in England banging on his door, demanding God knows what, but they were sure to cock up the whole planet if they didn't get it.

"Thank you so much for your clear and honest explanation," he said to the Irishman. "So let me guess at their respective goals. Kemp and my father are here for Lords. They want this world declared a new English colony and to start collecting the king's taxes. Peeler is here to keep an eye on everything for Commons. The Company wants to rob the place the way they usually do, the banks want their slice of everything, and the Merchants Guild is here to make sure the East India Company doesn't get all the shipping." He didn't bother to mention that his father and brother were here simply to steal him blind.

"An accurate summation, young man," replied the admiral. "You clearly merit the excellent reputation you have, especially among certain important gentlemen, men who know a good man when they see one. While I had feared for the man who had to defend this world from that circus on deck, I now think this place is in very good hands. Though I expect the war you are fighting here against giant demons will seem like quite the cakewalk after you come face to face with your British peers above."

All this puzzled Wyckham. Wasn't Cochrane here to stake the Royal Navy's cut of the golden goose? Cochrane acted as if the resources and business on Draez were still Wyckham's to manage.

"How very kind of you to say so," acknowledged Wyckham with a curt nod. "To receive such a compliment from Admiral Thomas

Cochrane is the dream of every officer in the Royal Navy. So what is our course of action? I await orders. I assume you have some for me?"

"Yes, well, regrettably, with the French closing in I left them on *Naiad* in the rush aboard *Scamp*. I also made the mistake of believing them to be designated for reading only upon arrival here on Draez, so I never even read them. How foolish of me! When I get back to London, Admiralty will give me a severe dressing down, and I will be forced to make my sincerest apologies. Meaning that for the remainder of this visit, I can do naught but put myself at your disposal in any capacity you see fit. You're running an entire world here; how might I be of assistance? And if you have nothing for me now, I will be quite content to remain an observer."

*What is he saying?* Wyckham had at least been grateful that he was going to turn the planet over to someone he trusted. If anyone could, Cochrane was one who could manage the world's development and keep the Draesh at bay. But the admiral was not going to take command here? And not even fight for the navy's interests in the coming political squabble? Thomas Cochrane's reputation as a man who went his own way was proving quite true. So why had he come here anyway? Wyckham was too bewildered to inquire further.

Cochrane saw his confusion and spoke reassuringly. "Boyo, of course I read my orders. They told me to take all measures to assist the delegation from the House of Lords in making this a new British colony. If you objected, I was to threaten to cashier you out of the navy or even arrest you. What claptrap! First of all, this is quite a different situation than England's latest conquest on the African continent. I've spoken with every officer and sailor aboard *Scamp* the past two days and learned much about this world. They told me about the Draesh, that they have ships that could defeat the entire Royal navy in moments, but that you defeated them and saved Earth and other worlds from their onslaught. Your men believe only you can keep these monsters away from this world. Now that I have personally seen these big ogres in battle, I can appreciate what a difficult task that is. And now I'm supposed to thank you by kicking you out of your office here so the Crown can collect its taxes? More nonsense from greedy politicians and armchair admirals."

He drained his glass with a final tip. "So I've made a battlefield decision: you stay in command. I don't know shite about what should be done here. If I took over, it would be a cockup for certain. With no idea how to deal with all the alien beings around here, I'd have the whole menagerie at one another's throats in a fortnight. Christ, I couldn't even get along with Parliament, and they're the same species as I am! And with the Draesh navy still about, this is not the time or place for those greedy, self-serving cretins up on deck here to be up to their usual shenanigans. All they would do is bleed the colony dry, while ignoring its importance to protect England from a terrible fate."

So Cochrane would not be taking command. Wyckham was still in charge, at least as far as the navy was concerned. Without a doubt the other factions represented up on deck had different plans, but at least now he had Cochrane's backing.

They talked further, mostly about the details of the battle Cochrane had just watched. He had been puzzled by the monsters' sudden disappearance in the fight, but now he learned that whales allied with the squadron had ripped apart the Draesh in the water. He congratulated Wyckham, Badoin, and his officers for an admirable fight. Though of course, if it had been him in charge, he would have needed only one ship to defeat the two Frenchies.

Finally, it was time to invite the first of the esteemed gentlemen above down and hear the plans England had for this planet. Just to get in a jab at his family and Lords, Wyckham told his sentry to first bring down Robert Peel, the MP from Commons. With a pledge to speak further when back in Port Wyckham, Cochrane called for and quickly drained another glass, then headed above. But he hesitated on the first step and turned back to Wyckham.

"However, I must pull rank on you and demand a berth here on *Righteous*. Faith and begorra, but I cannot live among those peacocks aboard *Scamp* a second longer. One more complaint out of Baron Shiteface, and I swear I'll immediately shoot the man."

"Certainly, Admiral. I'll send my gig over to *Scamp* for your dunnage right away. Give me an hour to have my sea chest and a few things moved to an empty lieutenant's cabin, and the great cabin is yours."

“No, that’ll not be necessary. I’ll take the lieutenant’s berth and dine in the wardroom. No more about it, I insist. After the accommodations aboard *Scamp*, this will seem like the royal bedroom at Westminster.”

The famous admiral, having shown Wyckham why he had the respect of the entire Royal Navy, climbed the quarterdeck stairs as the marine sentry returned with Robert Peel and announced him in. In walked a handsome young man with wavy brown hair and a serious expression. While only twenty-seven, he had been appointed undersecretary of war and the colonies. Wyckham respected what he’d heard about his work against corruption in Ireland. But he had no idea how he would stand on the issues before them here on Draez.

Peel declined refreshment (a temperate Irishman?), took a seat, and began.

“My thanks for giving me an audience with you now. I know you must have pressing military issues to deal with so soon after a battle.” He spoke in a clear, strong voice. After his first speech in Parliament seven years ago, Peel had been compared to a young Pitt before he became prime minister. “But first let me congratulate you on such a smashing victory. You have lifted the hearts of the entire delegation, which we desperately needed after watching HMS *Naiad* get pounded to pulp on the way here. You may be certain that I will do my best to make you the toast of the entire nation when you return.”

*And just how soon do you expect that will be?* Wyckham thought. The diplomatic fencing had begun.

“You are so kind to say so. Fortunately, we were blessed today with a powerful French ship allied with us, and that won the day. Couldn’t have done it without Captain Jean Badoin and *Leviathan*.” Let him think on that for a moment. If Wyckham was gone, what would the French captain with the most powerful ship on the planet do? “And not to mention our allies *in* the water.” Peel looked puzzled at that. Like Cochrane, he didn’t know about what had happened to the Draesh that had tried to swim aboard *Righteous*.

So Wyckham continued. “Yes, let me explain. On the way out here, we encountered a school of large flesh-eating whales. They actually

attacked *Righteous*.” (Wyckham wouldn’t tell him what they had really been doing against the hull). “Fortunately, another of our alien allies, the leader of the energy beings known as Fireflies, a close friend of mine,” (Wyckham didn’t mention how close), “was able to communicate with them. They led us to the enemy ships and later devoured the Draesh when they tried to board us. Yes, naval battles on this world are a bit different, I must say.”

Wyckham was laying the foundation for the argument that he should be kept in charge, that the planet needed an experienced government and military. “Admiral Cochrane has been so surprised by what he’s seen over the last two days, Greek fire shot incredible distances and using whales in battle, that he does not believe he would be a good governor of this world. He has asked me to remain in command here. Certainly I was hoping to be relieved. After all, I’m just a captain running an entire world. But as an officer in the Royal Navy, I must obey the superior officer on station and keep command here, using both British ships and those recently captured from the French. We will be signing up most of the French hands to continue manning them. Seems even frog sailors are eager to join my squadron once they hear about our tav...ah, the benefits of life here on Freeport. I’ll also be salvaging the guns from the three French liners that burned and sank yesterday, mounting them in additional fortifications around the cove. And, of course, I plan to produce many more of the long-range guns you saw in action, along with more of the Greek fire they shoot. Yes, should any foe actually make the difficult journey here, he will be greeted by five ships, a well-sited group of batteries, long-range guns, and flaming shot. I suspect my little city here will be a tough nut to crack.”

Wyckham’s message to Peel was clear. He had forged important alliances here, and he now controlled a very substantial military force as well. He could see Peel’s eyebrows were raised, the MP deep in consideration of all he had just heard. Running Draez as another English conquest would certainly be different from anything the undersecretary of colonies was used to managing. He must be asking himself what additional alliances Wyckham had forged here, important alliances

that Wyckham would keep secret. And taking the planet by force would not be easy now, with Wyckham's newly expanded fleet. Mayhap he was thinking that it would be a good idea to keep the young captain around for a bit after all?

The man silently eyed Wyckham for a few moments and then spoke. "So you understand exactly why this delegation is here. You have surprising political savvy for only a navy captain, and a young one at that. But my apologies. I too have been misjudged because of my age. Let us talk like gentlemen who care about their country. First, allow me to bring you up to date about recent political events back home so we may talk politics as equals."

Wyckham had been away from England for over three years now, thirty months at sea fighting the current American war and seven months here on Draesh. But he had talked with Captain Hamilton after *Scamp's* first trip to Earth and knew about George III being too ill to govern, and his son, the Prince of Wales, taking his place as regent.

"By all means, sir, sailors are always grateful for news from home," Wyckham nodded.

"In May of '12, George the Third abdicated the throne. I'm confident you know why." (He did; everyone knew of the madness of King George.) "His eldest son was proclaimed regent. But the young man is another of the House of Hanover's inbred disasters, solely concerned with drink and whoring. Parliament was left to select a prime minister on their own."

"Picking Robert Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool, as Admiral Cochrane has informed me," commented Wyckham, reminding Peel that he had other sources of information to compare Peel's statements to.

"Correct, sir. Which was no easy task to accomplish. Commons rejected him at first, but their own candidates couldn't get through both houses, leaving an opening for rational discussion and the reinstatement of Liverpool, in which I played a small part. But now a faction in Lords, led by Kemp and your father, by making this planet a political issue, have the government almost in their hands. They have declared Freeport the new India and faulted the prime minister for not aggressively colonizing this world. Their platform now has quite

a following in both Commons and Lords, as well as the general populace. They all ask why the PM could be so incompetent as to let this important discovery fall from England's grasp, taken for the personal benefit of a navy captain who is both deserter and mutinous renegade."

*Renegade? Deserter?* Wyckham pursed his lips, anger getting his bile up. "So after the small matter of my saving England and the entire Earth from destruction, I'm a renegade and deserter for not taking care to line the pockets of the usual gang of thieves back home? None of them did a damned thing here!"

"Well, look at it from the government's point of view," continued Peel. "You take a British squadron and fly off without orders, ending up with a personal fiefdom dripping with gold, running a commercial crossroads that puts the London docks to shame. Certainly, any conquest by forces of the Royal Navy becomes part of the empire; you know that. Any loyal subject of the king, not to mention a proper officer in the Royal Navy, would turn over this world and its commercial interests to Parliament."

That was enough for Wyckham. He leaned across the table, his countenance tight with fury. "So that's what a decent English gentleman would do, but not a traitorous scalawag like me, what? Take care in what you say next, sir, or we have a further matter to discuss, you and I," Wyckham spat, warning the man but deep down hoping Peel would give him a reason to issue a formal challenge.

"My apologies, Captain. Did I say a gentleman 'would' surrender the place to England? I meant to say 'should' hand it over, and that's what I am here to ask the courageous and valiant officer before me to do. Please understand, my good sir, that I represent compromise and rationality in our government. If you and I cannot resolve the situation, Kemp and your father will ride the issue to the top of British government. I can just see the campaign promises now. 'Vote Tory for your pound of Draez's gold!' Once they run the country, they will doubtlessly attempt some foolish attack upon this world."

*Hmmmmph!* The man protected his arse well, but there was no arguing with his predictions. Wyckham didn't need anyone else to tell him how people like his father were trying to halt Britain's social progress,

trying to reverse the reforms Britain was undergoing because they threatened the noble-born like themselves worldwide. Men like Kemp and his father wanted no less than a return to medieval servitude, especially in the countryside, and if they could carve up this important new colony to their own benefit, they would have enough gold to guarantee that only those in agreement were elected. And adding such a rich colony to the empire would make Kemp a greater hero than Nelson. The wave of adulation by the populace, assisted by generous distributions of gold, would keep their group at the head of government forever. Good God, his father could be prime minister someday!

“My apologies for my anger as well. These are difficult issues here we must consider—not the sort of questions a navy captain usually deals with. Let us continue our discussions further once we get back to my capital.” (He didn’t call it just Port Wyckham). “Right now, I have ships and prizes to command, and I suppose I must hear out the delegation from Lords that is angrily waiting up on deck.”

Peel made his good-byes and headed above as Wyckham rolled the man’s arguments over in his own mind. Peel did have a reputation for intelligence, hard work, and real concern for his country as opposed to his purse. He might be the best person to ally with here.

His sentry announced the two people Wyckham would never trust, his own father Alistair and brother Chauncey. While his father had always been on the “fleshy” side, now his brother had gained weight as well. They managed to roll into his cabin, exclaiming how wonderful it was to have the family reunited and to see Rodney healthy and prospering. Thank God Wyckham hadn’t had supper yet; he wasn’t sure he would have been able to keep it down, listening to such a load of false devotions. They quickly asked for brandy, which Obujimi served as they all sat down.

After responding to his son’s inquiries about his mother and some old friends in Cornwall, his father brought up the real reason for their visit.

“Now listen, Rod. As your family, we’ve come here to tell you in person what needs to happen with this planet. Like any other land that His Majesty’s Navy conquers, it is now the property of the king. It must

be opened up to colonization so England can develop the commercial opportunities and provide land for its expanding population. I understand you have done a remarkable job here, first winning the place for your country and then building a thriving city and opening up trade with other worlds. But this is a huge opportunity for England. This world will be under the jurisdiction of the secretary of trade, Sir Travis Shrewsbury, Earl of Colchester, who, by the way, is a friend of mine and a stalwart Englishman. He will do an excellent job here of distributing land and commercial franchises to those who deserve them. While you have done a great service to your country by taking this planet, it is now time to turn over its management to those more capable of managing this new world, one that will bring Britain untold wealth. So as Admiral Cochrane has undoubtedly explained, you will be going back to England, where I will work endlessly to get you a peerage and a baronetcy. With my extensive contacts in the upper house of Parliament, I can guarantee they will be granted you. Baron Kemp will remain here to begin the establishment of a colonial government.”

“But certainly there is no rush for you to return,” his brother chimed in. “One great sadness of my life is that I have seen so little of my wonderful younger brother due to his naval career. Let’s you and I spend some time together here. You simply must show me the taverns here that I’ve heard are the best in the world—ah, I suppose I should say all worlds, what?”

Here they were on a planet of utmost importance to everyone, and all his brother could think of was experiencing a new kind of brothel.

Nothing his father and brother had said surprised him. Alistair Wyckham was always leading the fight to protect the nobility’s privileges, and clearly his vision for the planet included vast new lands for England’s lords. And his brother had come along just to debauch in another place.

Looking his brother in the face for the first time in years, only to hear that drink and women were his brother’s primary pursuits, and seeing his father standing by approvingly, something finally snapped in Wyckham’s very being. The moment had arrived for him to break off all relations with his family. “Actually, Admiral Cochrane gave me



no such directions,” he said, no longer trying to hide his disgust with his own family. “What he has correctly realized is that Draez is a quite different place from any other location that England has ever put its footprint on before. With its importance to England’s survival, along with the rest of planet Earth, he believes it should be kept in the hands of those who are most familiar with the situation, instead of filthy rotters such as my father and brother who cannot see anything past their own purse strings. No, you’ll have to find another place to enslave the locals and line your pockets. I will not be returning to England soon, and I will continue to run this world, at least until I am sure that it and our own Earth are safe from invasion. And as far as our spending time together, Chauncey, I have more important things to do with my time than drinking and whoring with an older brother who has always treated me like a little joke.”

That produced a satisfying uproar, both of them getting to their feet and yelling that he was an ungrateful wretch after all they had done for him, a mutinous renegade traitor to king and country, acting like a vile commoner, etc. “So I’m a filthy rotter, is it?” said his father as he struck Rodney’s face as he had often done throughout his son’s childhood. Chauncey joined the attack by throwing his drink in his brother’s face, exclaiming, “Even your brandy is peep!”

That was all Wyckham would stand for. No one could come into the great cabin aboard a Royal Navy ship and strike its captain. “Sentry!” he called, and his marine on duty immediately entered and stamped to attention. “These two have attacked *Righteous*’s captain. They are to be put in the brig awaiting trial. Mayhap you’ll need some assistance from one of your mates?”

“Aye sah, no sah, don’ need no one else fah these two!” The marine corporal, a tall and muscular man, put his musket down, grabbed both men by their collars, and roughly manhandled them both out the door. Their complaints were immediately replaced by shouts of pain as the sentry yelled, “Quiet down, yah bloody fools!” and banged their heads together. It was all music to Wyckham’s ears as they were dragged bumping up the quarterdeck stairs. He sat down and had a very satisfying sip of his brandy. Rodney Wyckham had dreamed of this

moment all his life, the chance to set his father and brother straight about how he felt about them. They no longer had any place in his life.

For “peep,” the brandy was quite excellent; as a matter of fact, it was the best he had ever tasted.

But unfortunately, there were more supplicants above awaiting an audience with the planet’s ruler. When his sentry returned, he directed him back on deck to bring down Baron Edward Kemp, hopefully calmed down after becoming ensnared in his wife’s latest social manipulations. Christ, he’d been married to her for four years now, yet he still fell for his wife’s gaming. Better set up this encounter so that Kemp was restrained from calling him out.

“Ah, Corporal,” he called to the departing sentry, “also be so good as to ask Baron Kemp to bring his fellow members of Parliament down along with him.” Being in company with his Tory friends might keep Kemp from flying into a rage once he entered the cabin. Wyckham didn’t need thoughts of an upcoming duel weighing on his mind right now.

A few moments later, five men were announced in: Kemp, three other well-dressed travelers, and Lieutenant Rawlins. *What’s Rawlins doing here? Probably expects to be asked to act as my second.*

Rawlins made the introductions. “Along with your old friend Baron Edward Kemp, allow me to present Sir James Lloyd, of Lloyd’s Bank of London; Alexander Allan, director of the East India Company; and Frank Smithson of the London Shippers’ Guild.”

Wyckham nodded to the three businessmen but ignored Kemp, who was clearly having trouble controlling himself. They all managed to seat themselves as Obujimi poured glasses of French wine. Lieutenant Rawlins wisely stood behind Kemp, positioning himself to restrain the man in case he lunged at Wyckham.

“So what brings you gentlemen on such a perilous journey to my little planet here?” Wyckham asked, knowing full well what they were after.

Before Kemp could explode, Allan began a long description of what “the Company” was going to do to benefit the planet. The East India Company was an immense organization; it had its own navy with



hundreds of well-armed merchant ships. With the East India Company in charge of all trading through Port Wyckham, important goods would be brought in dependably from Earth, the company would take the burdens of all outbound commerce off his shoulders, and, of course, it would make sure that important local personages such as Captain Wyckham were well taken care of. (Oh, he must not forget to give Wyckham the Cornish meat pies he had brought for the captain; the captain must miss good English food). And, by the way, the Crown had granted the East India Company exclusive rights for mining on this planet.

That brought Lloyd and Smithson angrily to their feet, something that did not surprise Wyckham with these three competing pinnacles of commerce in the same room.

"Damn his eyes!" yelled Lloyd. "He'll bring in his own banks and insurance company, take over the whole place, and treat you like a serf! The crown cannot dictate such matters, Parliament has yet to be heard on this world's future. Captain, do not allow this brigand to sink his company's tendrils into England's new world!" Smithson, who had apparently worked his way up on the London docks, was even less diplomatic. "Don't trust either o' these slimy arseholes! Arrogant bastards'll screw you worse'n a Cheapside doxy!"

Wyckham inwardly fumed at all he was hearing. Christ, all he wanted to do here on Draez was protect the planet from a Draesh take-over, but clearly he was in the middle of a political battle for control over the world's immense wealth. A wise politician was needed to make deals with the representatives of the British Empire, not a navy captain solely trained to vanquish England's enemies. With no lunatic asylum yet established in Port Wyckham, the only solution he could see was to shoot the whole lot.

All the petitioners' yelling had pushed Kemp over the edge. "Enough from you squabbling merchants!" He stared at Wyckham with a look that would freeze a waterfall. "This vile rogue and I have an important matter to arrange!"

*Bloody Hell!* Now he'd have to fight a goddamned duel. And there was no good outcome to fighting a duel with Baron Kemp. If Wyckham

should win, all England would talk of the rotter navy captain who had groped a Baron's wife and then further humiliated the husband in a duel. If he lost, well, Kemp wouldn't be satisfied just giving Wyckham a wound. *Jesus Christ, even flying off to another world can't get me away from the idiots who run England!*

"Sah!" Wyckham's sentry burst through the door. "Slick surgeon 'ere, sah. Sez Moore's back from *Cornelie*, 'ee's wounded bad!"

Normally Wyckham would be furious at the sentry for barging in, but the news of Moore being wounded pushed all protocol from his mind. Wyckham was particularly fond of the midshipman, the young man who had saved his life at Hollow Mountain. Concerned, he rose from the table as the Slick surgeon entered the room.

Shouting abruptly stopped as Kemp and the three petitioners got their first glimpse of an alien. Slicks were slim of build, seven feet tall, had four arms, no hair, skin like wet porcelain, octopus-like suckers on their fingertips, and featureless faces with only three vertical slits for eyes and mouth. The four British visitors' eyes bulged wide, and their mouths were suddenly silent. Probably they too had thought Jarvis's tales were complete nonsense.

The alien spoke through the translator device strapped to its head. "The officer Moore has come from other ship, has four wounds. Both kidneys nonfunctional, need replacement, but has unusual blood composition. Cannot find suitable kidney donor." Slicks could transplant human organs, but apparently there were several types of blood among humans, and the donor and patient had to have the exact same kind of blood for a successful transplant. "He will not live long enough to sail back to hospital for mechanical one. Need shuttlecraft."

Wulfe's shuttlecraft had flown off after the battle with some of the more seriously wounded, and it wouldn't be back for hours. Christ, he should have asked for one of Wulfe's hand-held communication devices before he left, then the Slick could have called him back. But who would have thought there would be more wounded after the battle?

Something in the room started making a pulsing staccato sound, rather annoying. What now? It sounded to Wyckham like the buzzing of an angry bee.

The Slick looked down at one of the devices strapped to his waist. The gangly alien studied the device a moment and extended it toward Kemp, and the buzzing increased. He focused his unearthly stare at Kemp, who started to gasp and lean back in his chair, trying to escape the alien's penetrating gaze.

"You have correct blood," the gangly being stated as it continued to examine the buzzing device. Then he extended an open hand toward Kemp, its suckered fingertips wriggling in invitation. "Come with me. Need one kidney for a few days."

Kemp's eyes almost bulged out of his head. He tried to rise and back up at the same time, which resulted in a nasty fall backward over his tipping chair. "Keep away!" he screamed. "A fiend! God spare me!"

Ignoring Kemp's entreaties, the tall Slick surgeon grabbed him with three arms and yanked him up, shoving him roughly toward the door. Slicks were quite arrogant, mainly since they had the biggest fleet in the League of Worlds and led the wars against the Draesh. They didn't particularly brim with respect for any other species, and that certainly included British nobility. But they did appreciate Moore for his heroic fighting, and the concept that some human might not want to provide an organ for Moore was not something that crossed the Slick's mind.

Meanwhile, Baron Kemp was certainly losing his, screaming like a terrified child and looking about for help. "Oh my God! It's taking me! Please, oh my God, help, someone please help me! What is this thing? Help me, Wyckham, please, for God's sake!"

Understandably, Kemp thought that the removal of a kidney meant certain death, but the fact was that changing internal organs on living beings was a fairly routine medical procedure for the Slicks. If a patient had a failing organ, they could replace it with one from a corpse or even from another, similar species. They also manufactured electrically powered organs and could install them as well. Many of Wyckham's crew had pumps in their chests to replace destroyed hearts, or pulsating air bladders of metal mesh for shredded lungs. Kemp would be knocked out with a sleeping gas, one kidney would be cut out, and then, after a few days' rest, he would be completely

healed. Once they got back to their hospital in Port Wyckham, they would even offer to put a mechanical unit inside Moore and return Kemp's borrowed kidney. Wyckham suspected that the Baron would decline that offer.

Wyckham had trouble hiding his grin. "Baron, there's nothing to have any concerns about," he said, pursing his lips to keep from laughing. "This is a surgeon from another planet. Very capable fellow, just needs to cut out one of your kidneys to save another good Englishman, that's all. You'll experience no pain at all, just be a bit tired for a day or two, and then you'll be just fine. So sorry I didn't get the chance to discuss whatever you were about to bring up, but whatever it was will just have to wait. For now, let me offer you my sincerest gratitude for the life-saving assistance you are extending to my midshipman."

Kemp could not believe what he was hearing and became even more hysterical. "Cut out a kidney? This satanic demon here is going to cut out one of my kidneys? To put in a goddamned midshipman? Wyckham, you cannot let this happen! I'll give you anything! Money, land, Wyckham, please, anything...my wife! Yes, take her, she's yours, for God's sake! Our marriage is done, she's bleeding me dry, take her, she always wanted you anyway!" Kemp's begging faded away as the Slick briskly hauled him off to the orlop.

Hearing that his childhood sweetheart might want him produced a wave of the old excitement washing over him. Tracy Brashton wanted him? Yet in a moment the euphoria passed. He was now a different man with great responsibilities. Tracy Brashton was a person who could cause severe problems in the diplomatic world Wyckham was now so deeply involved in. And her actions of just a few minutes ago were not very endearing. Mayhap he was really released from his lifelong obsession with her?

A thought for later. But for now, Wyckham had to pretend he hadn't heard Kemp's last comments, graciously calling after him, "Thanks again, Baron. Your unselfish character is the model for all British nobility." He turned to his remaining guests and sat down, savouring the rare instance of the nobility getting their come-uppings. Time to get rid of the remaining greedy petitioners in front of him as well. Wyckham was done with all this nonsense.

“A true hero to help out my crewman like that,” he said to the stunned gentlemen remaining. “Might I ask that each of you consider doing the same? We have just finished a difficult fight, and the surgeon could use some body parts. A lung, perhaps? Or mayhap a testicle for some poor emasculated sailor?”

As hoped for, that immediately ended the meeting. Assuring Wyckham they would all give the request some serious thought, each of the three visitors immediately stood up in a rush to be the first to make his farewells.

Finally he was alone. There was still a horde of supplicants on deck, mostly businessmen seeking franchises, but Wyckham had no desire to deal with any more upper-class cutpurses today. And the damned bishop might as well go back to England. Wyckham didn’t need organized religion pushing for its slice of the planet as well. It was now time to plot his own course through all this.

He still thought of himself as a true Englishman and patriotic navy officer. Certainly it was his duty to hand over any conquered lands to the Crown. But this world was more important than any other land that Britain had colonized. If the greedy fools like Jarvis and Kemp got everything he’d won here, the safety of England, Earth, and the entire cosmos would be threatened by Draesh invasions. Not to mention that bastards like them didn’t deserve such a gift. They would bollocks up everything. No way could these narrow-minded nobles manage a planet populated by strange aliens. Wouldn’t be long before all the League aliens were fighting the British as well as the Draesh. And these blinkered British nobles thought English forces could easily take the place from whoever had it. They had no idea of the weapons that the League of Worlds could turn on them.

Thinking about the recent encounter with Kemp made Wyckham realize what he must do. By far the overriding question was who best would keep the Draesh off this planet. If the Draesh regained their home planet, they would soon continue their march through space, and Earth’s days would be numbered.

Faults he may have, but Captain Rodney Wyckham had done a pretty decent job of running the planet so far. Maybe someday he

would see a government come here that he could trust to hold off the Draesh, but not one led by clowns like Kemp. When he returned to the city, he would stage some ceremony to officially be declared governor of Draez. The planet would stay his for now. But he had no illusion that he wasn’t in for a tough fight.



10

## ANOTHER UNUSUAL DINNER PARTY

The next morning at six bells, after a quick breakfast of boiled eggs and coffee, Wyckham was up on deck. The hands were back to normal routine, holystoning the deck after having finished repairs to *Righteous* the day before. He went below to the orlop, the space below the waterline that was used for the treatment of the wounded, to check on Moore and Kemp.

The Slick surgeon, Mister 89,569, said both patients were asleep but doing fine after the kidney transplant. What would have resulted in Moore's slow, painful death back on Earth was just a routine surgical procedure here on Draez, and amazingly, both of them were expected to fully recover in a few days.

The attack had occurred while Moore had been speaking to the French crew on *Cornelie*. He had been stabbed from behind by a fanatical revolutionary in the crew, a Corsican who revered Napoleon and hated the British. He had walked up behind Moore and thrust two *ven-detta* knives repeatedly into his midsection, aiming for both kidneys as

assassins often did. But at least the incident aboard *Cornelie* had ended on a positive note. Moore had just told the French crew in perfect court French that they would be given full freedom here on Draez, and their first stop would be a welcoming party in the Ruptured Krag, with free drink and three women per man, when the attack occurred. The fanatic who had threatened that dream come true had been promptly bludgeoned to death by his fellow crewmen.

Wyckham called for his gig to be rowed over to *Cornelie* and inspect its state of repair. He was piped aboard properly by the English prize crew and was also introduced to the ship's French officers, who seemed all courtesy and excitement. Between them, they'd done pretty well so far; the ship was fairly well cleaned up. While there were still lots of holes in the woodwork from the previous morning's battle, the main problem was her damaged mizzenmast, which was badly cracked and would not stand in any wind. Carpenter Jones was rigging backstays from the mainmast so the ship could be sailed without using its mizzen. Most of the deck was back in order. All the wood debris had been thrown overboard, and her two dismantled guns had been lashed to the gunwales awaiting remounting on new carriages back in Port Wyckham.

Finally he had no more excuses for not going below to the brig where Jarvis had been stowed. Wyckham was afraid he'd lose control and kill the man where he stood. It was bad enough that the Royal Navy had given Jarvis his admiral's rank in the first place, but then the French too had to back him after he had proven himself daft. Gave him a fleet so he could come here and try to destroy everything that had been accomplished, not just by Wyckham but by a coalition of entire galaxies. How could this man continually cause everyone such ruin and then return to do it again? Wyckham would do the universe a service if he were to just draw his sword and run the man through right now.

He acknowledged the marine on guard and approached Sir William Jarvis, Esq. The man looked anything but noble. He was on the floor in a fetal position, babbling about demons and Satan. His clothes were filthy from the battle, and he had a foul stench about

him—clearly he had soiled himself. Shaking his head, Wyckham could only think of how the mighty could fall. There was nothing more to do here; this man was beneath his concern. With a word to the sentry to get Jarvis cleaned up, he left without speaking a word to Admiral Sir William Jarvis.

Back on deck, he saw a cutter approaching *Righteous*. It looked like one of *Leviathan's* boats. He was rowed back to the frigate and piped aboard to be greeted by Rawlins with an already opened message.

"There's to be a dinner tonight aboard *Leviathan* at four bells, first dog watch," said Rawlins amiably. "Should be a right good feed. Villeneuve was sailing with three French chefs whom Badoin has talked into joining his revolution. I heard it was not just his persuasive discourse; he did threaten to throw them overboard for a swim with the whales. Now they're confirmed citizens of the Republic, even wearing revolutionary cockades on those silly white kitchen hats."

Wyckham quickly scanned the note with an uneasy feeling. His fear was justified. Badoin was insisting on serving a victory dinner in his massive cabin, not only for the combatants but also for the newly arrived British dignitaries he had heard about. In a panic, Wyckham looked up to see if he could intercept the invitation going to *Scamp*, but he was too late. *Leviathan's* cutter was already departing the British brig. By now, all his infuriating visitors would be writing their acceptance notes.

Wyckham had hoped to avoid any further contact with this group. He knew there were several more who wanted to meet with him and offer all sorts of bribes to steal something off the planet, and he just couldn't face giving them an audience. Well, nothing for it now; he'd just have to avoid any petitioners and try to enjoy himself. At least Baron Kemp was still sleeping with a gap in his innards and wouldn't be there. And Wyckham did look forward to spending some time with Admiral Cochrane. But it would be a trying evening.

Several hours later, Wyckham was in his gig again, headed over to the big French ship of the line, all decked out in a new dress uniform. Obujimi had made it for him, using the very soft skin of the local three-eyed sheep and a silklike cloth made from the weavings

of those giant spiders. And using gold from the planet, Obujimi had even fashioned him solid-gold epaulets, buttons, and shoe buckles. Wyckham felt better dressed than European royalty at a coronation. Along with him were Lieutenants Rawlins, Clifton, and Mr. 89,569, the Slick surgeon.

All were piped aboard by a side party of French marines. If Wyckham thought he was well dressed, it turned out even Badoin's *infanterie du marine* was decked out better than he was. Their gray long-tailed coats were trimmed with brilliant scarlet lapels, cuffs, and collars. The coats' turnbacks were also scarlet but trimmed in real gold. Their tall shakos had black fur tops and leather chin straps, with a solid-gold diamond design above the visor. And all buttons were not only cast in gold but with eagle designs on their faces. *Hmph!* Badoin now had a palace guard clad in finery superior to the Vatican's Swiss Guards'. As a matter of fact, far superior.

Across the deck, Wyckham could see Capitaine Badoin giving a tour of his ship to a large group that included the entire British delegation. Wyckham walked over, fully expecting the French captain to be clothed like the Doge of Venice after seeing how he had attired his marines, and he wasn't disappointed. Badoin wore a shiny white tailcoat made of spider silk, with floral gilded trim. Most astonishing were its lapels, which were striped in three wide bands of sapphires, diamonds, and rubies to form the revolutionary tricolour. His white bicorn hat was also embellished with similar jewels in another tricolour design. Completing the show was a sash with *L'Aigle du Mer* spelled out in sparkling diamonds.

*Ah, how quickly revolutionaries adopt the excesses of royalty,* Wyckham thought, shaking his head at Badoin's costume. No matter what their politics, the French will always be French.

This would be a large and diverse dinner party. Wyckham could see Admiral Cochrane and Peel discussing ship's matters with some of Badoin's officers. *Leviathan's* ants and mudmen were chatting through their translators with some British merchants brave enough to approach them for God-knows-what deal. The Tory leaders Lloyd and Allan were across the deck, keeping a wary distance from any French.

As it was common courtesy to invite defeated officers to dinner after a battle, Villeneuve and his officers were there, milling together on the opposite side of the deck from the despised Brits.

An elderly man Wyckham had not met walked briskly over to him, carrying a large sketch pad and charcoal. While very spry, he must have been in his seventies, and he wore the long white wig and layers of lace of a man from the last century. But he had the alert eyes of a man half that age.

With a flourish, he made a leg and introduced himself. "*Escusame* if I am too bold, but allow that I introduce myself. I am Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes, at your service."

Goya? This was the Spanish artist famous first for his royal portrait paintings and later for *Desastres de la Guerra*, a modernistic and brutal abstract of the war with France. The work had attracted much attention and motivated many Spanish noblemen to join the partisans in the fight against French occupation.

"No fears as to your boldness, sir," Wyckham replied and made a leg in return. "We do not stand on ceremony very much on this world. And may I say I'm delighted to have such an acclaimed artist as you here on Freeport. Hopefully you'll take back some of your superb paintings to show everyone in Europe that this world is real and deserves respect." Wyckham was interested in anything that would get relations between England and Freeport on a better footing.

"*Si*, yes, the Baron Kemp has assured me that your King George has granted him a large holding on the world, with absolutely *magnifico* scenery. I plan to live here for a month or two and paint, however long it will take."

Kemp had already been granted a large holding? Probably planned to travel around Port Wyckham and cherry-pick whatever lands he wanted. Or maybe Kemp was just talking himself up, as he was wont to do. It didn't matter; the only thing Kemp was going to get from this planet was a hearty good-bye.

To Wyckham's surprise, he now saw an unescorted Lady Brashton, surely the real one, walking over to him. She was dressed in a billowing cream gown all taffeta and lace, her hair held up in a bun with



bejeweled brooches. He begged his pardon of Goya and set course to greet his childhood sweetheart.

Before he could reach her, some of the other visitors started looking behind him and then ran to the starboard gunwales. "Good God, it's true!" he heard a merchant say. "Just as Captain Badoin said!"

Wyckham turned around to see a familiar sight here on Draez, a cluster of glowing balls flying through the air. Badoin had of course invited his Comtesse de Pittard to attend, and the head Firefly was arriving along with several of her aides. But then something happened that Wyckham hadn't seen before. When the balls of energy alighted on the deck, the lead one split in two and turned into two women, Lady Brashton and the comtesse.

The Comtesse went to Badoin's side as the Firefly version of Lady Brashton immediately stepped over to Wyckham, attired in a gown to make Cleopatra blush. While it was gorgeously shaped and adorned, Wyckham couldn't help but notice her burgeoning breasts, pushed almost to the heavens by a bodice with visible whalebone stays, a costume more suited in a Parisian brothel than a formal dinner party. The Fireflies still had trouble separating appropriate dress from the favorite outfits they saw in sailors' minds.

This was going to be trouble. Wyckham suddenly felt like a battleground about to be pounded by two opposing armies. The two Lady Brashtons were on course to get within range of each other, the field right about on top of Wyckham's shoes. And clearly the one from Earth was cleared for action. Her visage displayed intent to murder, and her right arm was cocked back with its fist in a ball. Sure enough, as soon as she got close enough to the offending Firefly, she screamed, "You... witch! You...slattern from hell!" and spun her entire body to deliver another very respectable punch.

Her fist went right through the Firefly without disturbing her image. That was a surprise, since Wyckham had never seen a Firefly allow an apparent physical contact to appear as anything but real. Usually their images reacted to attempted physical contact and projected feelings to confirm the image. With no human body to absorb her energetic blow, Baroness Kemp's body followed her arm, and she

spun like a falling maple's seed pod, landing right on her elegantly attired *derriere*.

"My apologies, madam," the Firefly commented. "But I didn't know how I should react to a blow. What would you like me to do? Should I fall as well? Or should I appear to fight back and send your brain a message of pain at any level you like? Would you prefer minor or excruciating pain?"

Wyckham bent down to help the fallen baroness arise, who struggled up looking quite disheveled and still furious. She wound up to strike again at the Firefly image, but he managed to hold her arm in check, despite her energetic struggling.

The captain put his head down close to her ear. "Tracy, for God's sake, calm down. This isn't England. There's no one watching. The being that looks like you is just a ball of energy. She's not real, at least not as we understand reality. But she's a very important and powerful ally, and I must ask you to treat her with respect."

"Yes, of course," she muttered as she arranged her gown, making a social "about face" as she was very capable of doing. "The nature of these beings has already been explained to me. But I will allow no one to humiliate me the way she has tonight. Attending this affair looking like me and dressed like...ah!" She shook her head angrily. "I cannot find the words to describe any of this!"

One of the visiting delegation noticed what had happened and hurried over. It was James Lloyd, the banker who was a close associate of Kemp's, and it seemed he had seen everything. He took the baroness's arm.

"Baroness, apparently your stunning shoes were not the best for walking on an untidy French ship. How absolutely tragic that you've tripped and fallen." He turned to Wyckham. "Captain, would you fetch a female servant to attend the baroness? And where might she go to get herself ready for dinner after this unfortunate fall?"

*Ah, that's the upper classes for you,* thought Wyckham. They make up stories to cover their own, suggest someone else's mistake caused their problem, and demand your help since they're entitled to it.

"Well, like any ship fresh from an engagement, I'm afraid *Leviathan* has no women onboard—at least no human ones," he answered. "But

I do believe one of the alien ants onboard is a female, a queen as a matter of fact. Wouldn't that be exciting, for a simple baroness to be attended by a queen? Shall I ask Capitaine Badoin to send her over?"

Both Lloyd and Baroness Brashton glared disgustedly at him and left to inquire from a French lieutenant. Advised of the whereabouts of a room the lady could use to freshen up, Baroness Brashton hoisted her skirts up all by herself and shuffled off with Lloyd.

With all the guests arrived, everyone headed below to *Leviathan's* vast great cabin, which was the size of a small ballroom. Captain's cabins on a ship-of-the-line were impressive enough on English ships, but on a French ship that had unlimited access to gold, it was absolutely mind-boggling. It seemed every chair, shelf, and buffet used floral gold castings as supports. And it wasn't just the gold trim on everything possible. Badoin had apparently found some alien species that excelled in woodworking, because the furnishings were all of the highest quality, grand in scale and heavily carved. The massive dinner table had extensions added for the occasion so it could seat the dozens of guests present. It was supported by thick, square legs the size of Roman columns. The chairs were made of a beautiful mahogany-like wood with a reddish, high-gloss finish. The backs of the chairs were carved in a military motif, with the usual cannons, crossed swords, and bunting. But at the crown pediment of each chair was the arrogant visage of none other than the mad Corsican himself, Napoleon.

That quickly set off quite a bit of grumbling among the English delegation. Attending a social function hosted by a French officer was certainly acceptable, but the room shouldn't be decorated with Britain's archenemy. However, the food smells coming from the galley were quite enticing, and after a quick caucus, they decided to stay and took their seats.

Wyckham sat down to the right of Badoin at the table's head with the Firefly Lady Brashton to his other side. He was pleased that Cochrane was next to him; as a fellow naval officer, Badoin had seated him higher than the rest of the British visitors. Breaking with naval tradition, the defeated Admiral Villeneuve was not on Badoin's left but seated farther down, well past even Badoin's junior officers, a clear snub. Many

of both Wyckham's and Badoin's officers had Fireflies in the images of their favourite women seated next to them. Fortunately, Rawlins and Commander Hamilton no longer fought over who had the right to the image of Catherine Burford, Rawlins's fiancée. The Fireflies had provided Rawlins with a younger vision of this woman, so they both had Catherine Burfords in their lives. The remaining English visitors, including his father and brother, were near the far end of the table along with the most junior French officers. Wyckham was pleased that he was far from that maddening group; he wouldn't have to listen to their threats and entreaties—maybe he'd enjoy the evening after all? Presiding as hostess at the foot of the table was the image of the Comtesse de Pittard, flanked by the two Slick surgeons, a mudman, and an ant.

Wyckham realized that this was the first time most of the newly arrived British had seen any aliens. Their presence was proving extremely discomfiting to the visiting dignitaries, especially Allan. Despite his familiarity with all the strange animals of India, he was regarding the ant next to him with complete terror on his face. Since everyone in the delegation had heard of Baron Kemp's fate at the hands of the Slick surgeons, the rest were staring in fear at those two tall, smooth-featured beings. Several Englishmen were clutching at their midsections, hoping that their contents would not be appropriated to repair some common sailor's guts.

The table service was as magnificent as the room's furniture. Both the plates and utensils were solid silver from Wakely and Wheeler, London, and all the glassware was Venetian crystal. Most likely it had all been brought over from the defeated *Trinidad*. To complete the dinner table, two magnificent centerpieces were overflowing with fresh flowers. Once everyone was seated, stewards poured wine, and Badoin arose to propose a welcoming toast.

"*Bienvenue!*" He held his glass high and looked around the room, ending up looking directly at Villeneuve. "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité,*" he said, his tone instructional like a teacher's. Villeneuve stared straight ahead and didn't touch his glass. Everyone else quickly repeated the toast aloud and tipped their glasses without comment. The better sorts always ignored politics during toasting.

The real Lady Brashton, the Baroness Kemp, had finally arrived, escorted by Peel, and they seated themselves in two remaining chairs at the table's other end. Thank God for that. The baroness looked to her right and saw the seated mudman, which prompted her to make a ferocious attack on her glass and an immediate motion for a refill. With Villeneuve and Baroness Kemp already unsettled, Wyckham could see a troubled evening dead ahead.

*Forget those two! For Christ's sake, Wyckham, you just had another victory that saved two entire planets! Celebrate!* The Nile and Trafalgar were unimportant local skirmishes compared to what his latest fight had just won. He finished his second glass as Admiral Cochrane addressed him.

"Captain, I simply must hear about the campaign you conducted to win this planet. While I'm sure it will take several hours and many glasses for you to inform me fully on this bit of history, I'd be obliged if tonight you could give me a quick summary."

Wyckham started with the day they arrived, coming through an interplanetary transportation portal that didn't recognize a sizeable British squadron as having armament of any consequence (that raised the admiral's eyebrows). The first course arrived, local clams in wine sauce, as Wyckham continued with an account of the first fight with the Draesh and brief descriptions of the two major battles of the campaign, the fight for the transportation facility and the battle within the Draesh command fortress, known as the battle of Hollow Mountain. Cochrane silently absorbed all he heard. Just as Wyckham finished, their host tapped a fork on his glass to get everyone's attention.

"Ladeez on' gentlemon," Capitaine Badoin began. "Een 'onaire of owaire Anglaise veeseetors, we haf orranged a leetle entairtainmont. We Franch 'ere on Draez haf' actualee taught zee flora 'ere to compete een fencing tournamonts. May I call your attension to zee flowaires on zee taybell?"

Wyckham had heard rumours that some of Badoin's officers had been training local plants to perform tricks, but a fencing tournament? He watched as Badoin's steward placed three flowerpots on the table. One contained a purple posy, the second a white-and-yellow daisy, and the third had one of the nastier carnivorous plants on Draez. The

sailors had named these crockablooms due to the rows of vicious little teeth on their petals, which resembled those of an African crocodile.

The first two plants were placed about a foot apart, with the big green crockabloom between them off to the side. Apparently the two large centerpieces were cheering sections, one filled with posies, the other with daisies. Their occupants now became quite active and started moving about, trying to get a good view of the goings-on from their vantage point on opposite sides of the fencing *piste*.

"It zeems zees two flowaire speesees do not like each othaire," Badoin explained with a grin to the newcomers. "Zere was an een-cidont onboard *Righteous* zat made zem forevair enaymees."

Wyckham knew exactly what Badoin was referring to. During a memorable dinner months ago, one of the posies in a table centerpiece had stolen food off a marine captain's plate. The officer tried to stab it with a fork, but it ducked behind a daisy, which was mortally wounded by the man's thrust, despite having committed no offense. It seemed the daisies remembered the cowardly act by the posy, and relations between the two genera had seriously deteriorated.

"So we haf' teachd them *la escrime* weeth spoons," Badoin continued, "and today zee champion of zee daysies weel fight zee champion of zee posees. Zee *directaire de escrime*, zee beeg green one weeth zee fork, weel keep ordaire."

So the crockabloom had a deadly fork to use in case either duelist committed a foul. Spoons were handed to the two combatants after the director had been given his fork. The big green fellow was looking at Badoin.

"*En garde! Pret?*" he announced, looking at each fencing flora in turn to see if it was ready.

Damned if the duelists didn't salute each other! Holding their weapons with vine-like appendages, both the daisy and the posy extended their weapons toward each other, pulled them back for a kiss to the "blade," and finished with a flourishing cut to *octave* that Napoleon's fencing master would have approved of. Then they crouched low, turned sideways, raised a second vine behind them for balance, and nodded to show they were ready. The directing green crockabloom raised a vine in a ready signal.

“*Alle!*” Badoin called, and the green flower signaled the match to start by dropping its vine. The action began with each combatant leaning forward and feinting in various lines, trying to get a reaction. While unable to move out of their pots, the flowers were able to change the fighting distance by leaning fore and back. The spoons were clanging as each flower made parries to close the line when a feint penetrated too far. Finally, the daisy made a redoublement after a low feint and thrust its spoon out in a blurringly fast extension, hitting the posy right in its stem.

“*Alt!*” Badoin yelled, and the green *directaire* leaned forward from its pot and dropped his menacing fork between the two plants to halt the action. “Zee attack een *quarte a’ gauche, bon touche!* Daizee *un, zee pozee zero. Pret? Allez!*”

With the score one to zero, the bout started again. The posy made a quick low attack in *septime*, trying to catch the daisy still off his guard from the halt. But the sly daisy was only pretending to be relaxed and made the parry with a clink as the spoons met, then made an immediate riposte to the posy’s *quarte*. The posy chased the blade in an attempt to parry, but the daisy dropped the spoon’s “point” in a classic disengage. After the posy’s blade passed, it lifted its weapon back up and leaned forward to strike the posy’s stem high in *sixte*.

“*Alt!*” called Badoin. “*Attack a’ droit non, parrad, riposte a’ gauche, oui! Daizee deux, zero. Pret? Allez!*”

The attack from the right having been parried, the reply from the left was good, and now the daisy was up two to zero. The action started again with a series of furious direct attacks by the posy, which the daisy parried easily. Suddenly, in an apparent floral rage, the posy broke the rules and grasped its opponent’s spoon with its unarmed vine, then leaned forward to bash the daisy on the head with the bowl of its spoon. The daisy’s petals were ripped away, and the flower dropped its own spoon and fell over the side of its container, at the least unconscious and very possibly deceased. The centerpiece holding the daisies went wild, its occupants bobbing up and down and furiously waving their leaves, while the pot with the posies seemed to be rejoicing, smacking their own leaves together to produce a dull clapping sound.

Badoin was horrified that one of his fencing students had lost control and acted so crudely in front of his guests. “Ah, *tropa!* Foul! Illegal use of zee unarmed hand! Directaire, get zees match undaire control!”

The vicious-looking green plant, apparently embarrassed that he’d let the bout get out of control, responded by thrusting its fork right into the posy’s stem. One of the prongs passed right through the angry posy. It folded over and dropped its weapon as well.

That was all it took for the pot full of posies to explode in anger, and the dinner table became a riot zone. And like the Nika riot in 532 Constantinople over a chariot race, this would be a fight to the death. Months of hatred on both sides had finally boiled over, and the two flora species went at each other in a wild frenzy. It turned out the plants could stretch several feet out of their pots, and they used this capability to quickly arm themselves. Both groups grabbed knives and forks from astonished guests and started stabbing and slashing viciously at each other. The air was quickly filled with severed petals and leaves flying about. Even the unarmed flowers were fully engaged, trying to rip the blooms off their opponents using their surprisingly strong vines. Some opportunistic flora wisely ignored the combat and took advantage of the chaos to grab food off guests’ plates, the clams being an especially desirable treat. And damned if a bunch of the posies didn’t go for Wyckham’s wine! The whole thing reminded Wyckham of a typical deck fight, with half the hands fighting and the other half going for the foe’s rum barrels.

Unfortunately for the visiting British dignitaries, the centerpieces had been placed right in front of them, and the fighting spilled over onto their laps. James Lloyd panicked when a daisy stabbed his hand with a fork, aiming for a posy hiding behind it. Lloyd started screaming, “My God! Plants are attacking people! It’s the end of days! God save us!” One look at his hand with a protruding fork convinced the rest of the visitors that it was time to leave, and all at once, they leaped up looking for the nearest exit. But the chairs had been crowded at the table for the grand affair, and the only way to leave the table was to wait for a servant to move some chairs. Peel fell backward as he tipped his chair over in his haste to get away, and several others followed

suit, crowding the floor with thrashing bodies and broken furniture. Adding to the chaos, Baroness Kemp tripped on Peel's prone body as she tried to escape, landing face first in an overturned dish of drawn butter.

Wyckham managed to control his mirth, but many of the junior officers, accustomed to unpredictable events here on Draez, were in hysterics watching the mayhem unfold. Badoin, however, was furious that his glorious dinner party had taken such a horrible turn. He grabbed his plate and smashed the green flower into pulp with it, sending crockery shards everywhere. "Zees goddamned directaire was supposed to keep ordaire!" he yelled in disgust. "My aypologies to all. Stewairds, remove zees stupeed flowaires!"

Servants jumped to remove the centerpieces, taking a few cuts and stabs in the process, but soon the rioting flora were all gone. Servants helped people up and removed broken furniture, and calm was slowly restored. The flustered diners returned to the table as kitchen staff emerged to replace broken plates and missing silver. Several of the British visitors quickly tipped their glasses and called for refills, still wide eyed and shaking their heads to one another. Lloyd finished off three glasses in rapid succession while *Leviathan's* surgeon bandaged his hand. Tracy Brashton wiped her face and dress with a napkin, trying to remove the melted butter she'd landed in, then lunged at a passing steward for a fresh glass which she downed in one gulp.

Badoin put on a *bon vivant* visage to get the dinner repaired. "Zo, now owaire welcome veesitors 'af 'ad a taste of life on zees world. As our Capitaine Wyckham says, 'zere ees nevaire a bloody dull moment aaround 'ere."

Smiles from the British helped to calm matters further as the second course arrived. It was a local favourite, goat in a sauce made of brown herbs brought in from some parallel universe. Everyone marveled over its taste, more glasses were topped off, and soon the mood improved. Guests even started joking about the recent floral riot. "That was even worse than when that scoundrel Wilberforce proposed the antislavery law in the House of Lords," and "Damned if I'll ever have flowers at my table again!"

Admiral Cochrane in particular seemed to have enjoyed the whole thing. He leaned over to Wyckham and commented, "I say, pretty scrappy plants you have in this place. Wouldn't mind a few in my next crew. Certainly they'd excel in 'small arms' practice, ha haw!"

"Zees was a deesgrace."

That loudly spoken insult shut down the improving mood. Wyckham looked down the table, seeking the source of the loud complaint, something that gentlemen generally did not make during a formal affair. It was a French lieutenant, in his midtwenties, with bushy black hair and a large mustache.

"You defeat us yestairday, and now you make us seet for an attack by horriblay plants from yewaire world?" the man continued angrily. "Then you laugh at owaire fear? You enjoy yourselves at owaire egg-spense? Owaire terror eez entairetainmont for you while dreenkeeng yowaireselves seely?"

Rawlins was seated directly across from him and was too far into his cups to put up with any complaining. "I say, fellow, what's there to be sour about? You just witnessed an event to put the gladiatorial combat of ancient Rome to shame! Where's the last time you saw such bravery in a fight?" He turned away from the Frenchman and looked down the line of British officers near him. "Not yesterday on his own deck, I'll warrant." His fellow officers laughed and slammed the table. With that, the Frenchman shot to his feet.

"Bravairee? You speak to me of bravairee?" he pointed to Wyckham. "What of zees Capitaine Weekham of youwaires who keels my fathaire? When he breengs 'ees entyaire crew to zee challenge weeth zee lone gentlemon? Like a common 'eyewaymon?"

So this was the son of the Royalist fleet captain he'd dueled in the fight on the *Trinidad's* deck. And the angry lieutenant didn't have the facts of it. He seemed to actually believe that it had been Wyckham who had set an ambush using other crewmen, not his saintly father. But Wyckham didn't have the energy nor the interest to set the man straight. He reached for his glass with a murmured word to Cochrane: "And I thought the French revolutionaries were hard to endure. If these Royalists are representative of their faction, maybe Britain should've backed Napoleon after all."



The young man down the table didn't hear Wyckham's comment, but Villeneuve did and sent him a frothy look fit for a mad dog. Wyckham and Cochrane pretended not to notice and simultaneously reached for their glasses.

But Villeneuve wasn't going to let this slight be ignored. "What do you eggspect from *Anglaise*, Lieutenant Tourneur? Decencee? Chivalree? Zey left zat in zere taverns *du* centairies aygo, when zey beheaded zere Keeng Charles. Unfortunately, *La Belle France* 'as lost zee battle to win zees place, zo we most resign owairselves to zee deespee-cable conduct on zees world. Seet youwaireself down and show zem zee propaire manners for gentlemon."

*Arrogant bastard!* Wyckham was feeling the wine, and his self-restraint was ebbing rapidly. If French nobles were so superior, how come they never beat the English nor Napoleon? The damned frog Royalists were acting as if they were the victors here on Draez.

With the French lieutenant temporarily becalmed, a resurgent Lloyd now vented his anger at Wyckham. "I for one find myself in agreement with our French guests. One of your damned flowers tried to kill me! And you think it's all a fine jest, scaring Britain's finest, who have taken the risks of coming to this wild world, just for England's benefit? Sir, your actions are those of a drunken commoner in some sordid tavern!"

Now Wyckham was near his boiling point. Disparagement from a defeated foe, while not polite, was at least understandable. But to hear fellow Englishmen complain, men whose empire he'd just saved, was simply infuriating! The Firefly Lady Brashton at his side sensed his mounting anger and tried to settle him down.

"Captain, do not allow all this to spoil the evening. As human women do when the males get angry, may I try to calm matters down? Let's enjoy the evening. We should celebrate your thwarting of the Draesh again. You should have pleasant memories of this affair," she said as her hand reached below the table to stroke his thigh.

Well, that certainly did take his mind off throwing a drink in Villeneuve's face. Pleasant memories? Exactly what did she have in mind? Sometimes the randiness of the Fireflies knew no bounds. While

they could probe the minds of men for all sorts of information, they did not seem to have a basic understanding of social propriety. No doubt she was interested in copulating right now, in front of the whole party!

"Don't let them ruin this celebration," she continued. "Your victory today has again saved this world as well as your own from the depravations of the Draesh. You should be very proud."

She stood, raised her own glass, and proposed a toast in a firm, clear voice to the entire party. "To this planet. May it continue to prosper, and to our human saviors." She paused and looked invitingly at Wyckham. "May they continue to give us so much."

The new visitors to the planet were further appalled that a woman would propose a toast in front of sailors, but everyone else joined the toast with their "Hear, hears," the other Fireflies particularly enthusiastic though with more demure exclamations of approval. Certainly they understood their leader's double entendre about "giving so much." Wyckham had an alarming yet excited feeling in his stomach as he realized where this evening might be headed.

She sipped at her glass, sat down, and looked directly at Wyckham. She fluttered her eyes ridiculously fast at him, as rapidly as the buzzing wings of a fly. Sometimes Fireflies had trouble with the mechanics of flirtation. Certainly hadn't gotten that parlor trick right just yet. *Not particularly enticing, no.* She leaned over to him and placed a probing hand in his groin. *Well, she has that one right! Here we go again!*

Months ago, after their first victory over the Draesh, there had been a celebratory dinner aboard *Zeus* that had gotten out of hand. As far as the Fireflies had understood, British officers always desired sexual congress when consuming alcoholic beverages, especially after a stressful event like a battle. So all the "ladies" present had been delighted to participate in an astonishing orgy after Wyckham and his "Lady Brashton" had gotten things started. The event was one of the reasons Wyckham never considered returning to England, since Admiralty would certainly have court martialed him immediately for leading an orgy right there in *Zeus's* great cabin.

But dammit, they weren't on Earth, Admiralty was powerless to get at him here, and Wyckham had tipped too much to care. Right



now, rogering this delightful vision seemed an excellent idea. He was so fed up with all the complaints from the Royalist Frenchmen and the British diplomats—why not shock their perfectly tailored breeches off? And damned if Wyckham didn't have a special idea that would really give their egocentric propriety a jolt!

"My dearest Lady Brashton, I can no longer hold myself back from... ah...coupling...with you right now. And I have a special request. After such an important battle as we have just won, it is customary to for the victors to try to outdo one another in...ah...'manliness.' I know you can change how my image appears here. Could you make me appear the most 'manly'?"

Lady Brashton put a hand to Wyckham's cheek and moved closer, glancing over his face. "Of course, Captain. Any image is possible. Let's see..." She quickly scanned his facial features. "With a little work here in the center, you could have a large, hawk-like nose and high, bony cheeks. Or maybe some giant, bushy eyebrows. That would be quite fearsome looking, I imagine."

"No, for God's sake no, do not change my face! I was referring to my...ah..." he was having difficulty saying the word..."my phallus?" Might you make mine appear very large?"

"Of course," the lady replied. "That seems reasonable. I understand that human males constantly fret over the size of their genitals," she said, and then seemed to get absorbed in thought for a moment. Then, as once before, during the now-scandalous party aboard *Righteous*, she again started to perform an astonishing aerial ballet, floating slowly up and over to him, her legs spreading wide in invitation, all her clothing disappearing in a wink!

Wyckham immediately felt an immediate stirring in his loins—how could he not with such a vision flying toward him? Though he assumed she was also increasing his excitement by sending his brain a stream of those "electrons" that she said controlled human arousal. But what in hell, his breeches were beginning to rip from the inside! He knew that they really weren't ripping; it was all a trick image she was making, and she was also sending his brain electrical beams that made him feel what he was seeing as well. But Christ, it all looked and felt so completely real!

The rending noise from his breeches was loud enough for others to hear. The MP Peel and the banker Lloyd stopped their discussions and turned inquisitively to Wyckham. The puzzled looks on their faces quickly turned to astonishment when they saw the Firefly version of Botticelli's Venus flying through the air. As Wyckham glanced again at the perfect naked angel floating down to him, an even greater pulse of desire welled through him, and damned if his member didn't break completely through his breeches and bounce up against the underside of the table! It hit the table so hard that the tabletop lifted a hand high, tipping over most of the guests' wine glasses. After lunging at their falling drinks, everyone at the dinner turned to see the floating image above Wyckham, and an immediate gasp swept over the gathering. Down the table, Wyckham saw the actual Tracy Brashton leaning far over the table looking for the source of all the commotion, her eyes having trouble focusing.

Then the real chaos started. Wyckham glanced back at the goddess above him, which resulted in his phallus expanding further and pushing the table aside for all to see. It was getting ridiculously long, rising over the table like a giant snake, and still it kept growing! Many of the guests stood up tried to back away, terrified of this latest ungodly monster, resulting in more pandemonium. Chairs again tipped over, guests stumbled over them and fell, others tripped on the thrashing bodies, and no one went anywhere. Meanwhile, Wyckham's uncontrollable genitalia had extended straight up, stopping only inches from the quarterdeck beams above! The damned thing was now as tall as a man!

The Firefly settled down next to him and dropped her hand to the base of his member. "Is it sufficiently large now?" She inquired. "I can make it larger, but I believe we would have to go outside."

A panicked Wyckham started to respond. "Good God, madam, stop this! Please reduce..." But then, the touch of her magical hand with its electrical pulse produced an overwhelming rush of pleasurable warmth coursing through his entire body, and that made him completely speechless. He knew that propriety should make him halt the energy being from projecting such an image, but the hell with it!

Silence reigned in the room except for Wyckham's uncontrolled gasping, as mouths gaped and eyes ballooned, everyone trying to accept what their eyes told them they were seeing. His astonished brother, Chauncey, almost dropped his jaw all the way down into his creamed potatoes.

Admiral Cochrane alone had a wide grin on his face, and though he was well into his cups, he managed a comment. "Well, that's rather impressive, Captain! Is it springtime on this world? 'Tiz a Maypole, and now we all dance about it?"

The naked image seated at Wyckham's side smiled at the suggestion. "Why, yes, it's a spring Maypole!" She turned to address the other Fireflies. "We should all celebrate and dance around the Maypole!"

With that, she jumped up, grabbed the middle of the monstrous thing anchored in Wickham's lap with one hand, and started spinning around in the air! Immediately, several other Fireflies left their seats and flew over to grab the giant phallus and spin around it as well. It reminded Wyckham of monkeys he'd seen in Africa at play on a tree. Then the Lady Brashton image climbed to the top, clamped onto the shaft with her legs, leaned back until she was upside-down, and slowly spiraled downward, with her arms opened wide like a circus acrobat beckoning for applause. Immediately other Fireflies started performing on the impromptu Maypole, climbing to the top, clamping on with elbows and thighs, and contorting their bodies in all sorts of ballet-like positions as they too slowly spiraled down onto Wyckham's lap.

Now a commotion started from the other end of the table. Good Lord, it was Baroness Kemp, jumping up on the table almost stark naked! Tearing off her last petticoat and flinging it away, she ran down the table toward Wyckham, shouting, "Yes, a Mayday celebration!" in a slurred voice. She stumbled slightly over a serving dish but managed to stay upright. "Damned if I'm not going to join this celebration!"

With that, she leaped the final few feet, extended an arm to grab Wyckham's giant member, and, since there was nothing for her to grab onto but a Firefly's magic image, immediately went flying, this time landing headfirst in a large soup tureen. Wyckham felt a moment's remorse for the disappointing outcome of her attempt at celebration,

but it was immediately washed away by another wave of erotic pleasure engulfing his entire being.

Now one of the French officers arose in a petulant fury. It was the angry lieutenant again, the one whose father Wyckham had killed yesterday, and he was definitely not enjoying the Mayday celebration.

"Sacrebleu, you are Satan 'eemself! Yestaireday you mordair my fathaire, an' now we see 'ee you are truly Lucifaire weeth eez giganteek peneez, cavorteeng weeth weetches from 'ell! Een front of gentlemon and madams! Deezgracefool!" With that, he drew his sword. "You may keel me, Satan, but I am 'appy to die fighteeng such eveel!"

Wyckham suddenly had to focus on a real threat. There was one inebriated and angry frog across the table about to kill him. He stood up to draw his own sword in defense, causing the immense pole protruding from his body to drop to a horizontal position and point right at the enraged Frenchman's face. The frog lieutenant's eyes went wild in fear, apparently believing that he was about to be attacked by Satan's giant penis. He swept his blade back and forth trying to parry it, hitting nothing since there was nothing solid to hit.

But the Fireflies cavorting on the "Maypole" thought this was more good fun. "Yes, another fencing tournament!" the Lady Brashton cried. She grabbed Wyckham's protruding phallus at its base and began to fence with the French officer, yelling "Thrust in *quarte*! Parry *sixte*!" aiming the lengthy shaft at the appropriate target areas on the Frenchman. This prompted a furious defense by the terrified lieutenant, but again his parries met only a floating image, and he started screaming in expectation of death from a the giant penis. Finally he jumped back, dropped his sword, screamed, "Death to zee demohn!" and pulled out a small pocket pistol, the kind favoured by highwaymen and cutthroats. He aimed it at Wyckham's head and cocked the hammer.

Part of Wyckham's brain realized he'd better do something to defend himself, but most of it couldn't care less. With all the ministrations he'd been receiving from the Fireflies "celebrating" on his member, he was consumed by overwhelming ecstasy. With a final shudder, his body wrenched in orgasm, bouncing him around, in complete loss

of control. He knew he was about to get shot, but it didn't seem to matter right now. What better way to die?

Thankfully, the attending Firefly had kept his "point" on target, aimed right at the opponent's head, and now a hose-like stream of seed exploded from the tip. Wyckham had one eye closed in ecstasy, but his amazement had kept the other open. Christ, the torrent put the discharge from *Righteous's* six-man bilge pump to shame! The Firefly had even conjured up the image of a giant sperm discharge for all to see! Apparently she believed that giant genitals should have huge orgasms!

It looked as if someone had thrown the contents of a full milking bucket through the air and hit the horrified Frenchman right in his face, covering most of his head like a fresh snowstorm on a Swiss mountain top. He fired his pistol in blind panic, only managing to put a ball through the stern gallery window behind Wyckham. "*Mon Dieu, my eyes, zee pain!*" the Frenchman screamed. "*Sataan 'as blinded mi!*" Suddenly he stopped yelling and fell forward, sprawled motionless across the table in front of him. And there, standing behind him, was Obujimi, holding an unopened wine bottle, which he had just used to deliver the French lieutenant a smart blow upon the back of his head. The valet very carefully wiped the bottle off and placed it back on the wine server, then bent down to grab the unconscious Frenchman by his arms and drag him off to the surgeon.

Wyckham slowly turned back to an absolutely silenced room, with all the new arrivals to the planet staring at him in shock and horrified disgust. But then his officers, who had spent most of the past seven months in the Ruptured Krag and seen Fireflies conjure up some pretty wild images, piped up with their comments. "What a duelist, our captain! Beat the man to the shot quite smartly!" and "Burned the foe's eyeballs so the man couldn't shoot, he did!" Badoin's French officers, revolutionaries all and no friends of the Royalists, also shouted their approvals: "You heet heem in zee eye. A most deefecult shot! *Bon touche!*" They raised their glasses and toasted Wyckham, nodding their heads in approval.

Lieutenant Rawlins was beside himself with mirth over the whole matter. "Well done, Captain! Now you show us that you are not only

the best, but also the biggest man among us, har har!" He turned to the visiting British. "Did you know the nickname the hands have for their captain? *Dick'em Wyckham!* And a well-deserved nom de guerre it is! You must all come to the Ruptured Krag and see him roger the images of all the crowned heads of Europe, as he knocks them off one by one!"

All heads now turned to Rawlins, their horror now knowing no bounds. The first lieutenant, at this point fully absorbed with drink, misread their looks as confusion and decided some further elucidation was in order. "Oh, yes, the Lady Brashton Firefly keeps a procession of European royalty on hand in the tavern for him to choose from. But best of all is when our gunner, Peter Crawford, ruts on the floor with the king's sister Caroline, Queen of Denmark. She went wild for him! Said her husband, King Christian, was known for being too drunk to rightly put a leg over her!"

That final image was the last the visiting British and the Royalist French officers could stand. Moved by disgust, and probably also in fear of being attacked by another gigantic sex organ, they began a mass exodus for the door, amid cries of "Un-Christian filth!" and "Zee Anglaize capitaine eez een league weeth Satan!" Minister Peel was still there, trying to get the Baroness Kemp out of the soup tureen and underway, along with two London merchants passed out from a combination of shock and drink. Wyckham, Badoin, their officers, and Admiral Cochrane also remained, along with the Fireflies and the four aliens.

"So the better sorts have left us," muttered Cochrane as he watched them all leave, followed by a belch. "Cannot say I will miss them." He turned back to Wyckham. "So is it true what I've heard happens around here once dinner is concluded and all these beautiful sirens are flying about?"

Wyckham had collapsed back into his chair, exhausted mentally and physically. Though the giant phallus attached to him was now shrinking, his brain was still reeling from what he'd just done. Had this monstrous thing drained his bodily fluids to the extent that he

was dying from dehydration? He certainly felt like it. Some part of his mind was trying to get him to respond to the admiral, but the rest of it had no idea how to accomplish that. *Wyckham, snap out of it! It wasn't real, it was just one of those electrical images!* But with the accompanying feelings she'd sent to his brain, it had been staggering in its reality.

Again, Rawlins came to his assistance. "Well, I believe we should give the famous visiting admiral a taste of social life on Freeport. Ladies, what say the rest of us all join the maypole party?"

Cries of "Hear, hear!" and "Oui, oui!" rose from the remaining English and British officers, and the Fireflies in female form responded with smiles as well. Immediately, the sounds of breeches ripping filled the air as the table started to shift and bang about. *No, not an entire roomful of gigantic members!*

But that was exactly what was occurring. One by one, growing male genitalia extended up from each man's lap, some of their owners reacting in astonishment, others cheering themselves on. "Go, old friend, go! Make sure you get longer than these Frenchmen's!" and "Oui, show owaire Anglaise fronds zee magneeficence of Galleek glans!"

No sooner had all these monstrous sex organs reached the ceiling than all the ladies' clothing magically disappeared, and they leaped up and grabbed onto the new "Maypoles," spinning around and passing from one to the other like a game of flying musical chairs. They fell into formation together, staying equally spaced like a well-practiced ballet troupe. All the lamps in the great cabin were flickering due to airs from the women flying around, which gave the room an aura of ritual Dionysian madness. *Good lord—and I started this unbelievable debauchery!*

Now the dance of sexual preparation ended, and all the women picked out their partners for the Fireflies' real goal—collecting human seed. Some caressed and stroked the giant shafts, and others climbed up on the big penises like circus acrobats and mounted themselves on the tips. Their bodies arched and rolled just as in normal sexual congress, except that they were ten feet away from their partners! For once the term "put a leg over" did not fit the act.

Just when he thought he'd seen the absolute pinnacle of depravity, he noticed Capitaine Badoin conversing in the ear of a stately, raven-haired beauty wearing naught but fabulous jewelry. Wyckham managed to make out a few words, but clearly the last word he spoke was the word "derriere." *No, it cannot be, not with these mast-size genitalia!*

But the Firefly nodded and responded, "Oui, c'est de'licieux—tres bon!" and then climbed up on the upright pole and inserted the end right between her buttocks! Then, to Wyckham's amazement, she arched her head back and slid all the way down the shaft, until damned if the man's giant priapus didn't emerge from her open mouth! Christ, it had surely killed the woman, smashing through all the organs of her body!

But despite his current state of intoxication, he was still able to remember that the sight was not real, just a projected image. Good God, apparently the Fireflies thought there was a simple connection between a human's mouth and its anus, and they were projecting an image that illustrated the belief!

While still impaled like a pheasant on a spit, she spread her arms wide, pushed off from the table with her leg, and spun like a dancing girl in London's Lyceum Theater. Then, by pulling her arms in close, she managed to treble the speed of her spinning until she was just a blur. The giant phallus rising from the Frenchman's breeches reacted by spewing a steady stream into the air, attracting several women to this new source of seed. Badoin, in a shuddering state of ecstasy, could only manage to mumble, "Zee Fontaine of Zeus at Versailles!"

The rest of the Fireflies copied the act they had just witnessed, and now almost a score of them were impaled on giant phalluses that entered their buttocks and emerged from their mouths. At this moment, who decided to return to the room but an intoxicated and stumbling Baroness Kemp, indignantly yelling back at Peeler, who was trying to restrain her. "Sir, you are not my husband! Only I will decide what is appropriate for myself on this new world!"

With that, she turned to face the room and stopped abruptly at the sight of a dozen women sliding up and down on giant penises. With a turn as crisp as a Hussar's about-face, she headed quickly back up

the main deck stairway muttering some garble about “a filthy forest of impaled bums.”

Wyckham closed his eyes to avoid seeing the ladies’ feeding frenzy that he knew was coming. It was time to leave this shocking spectacle. Partly he was shocked beyond belief, but he was also afraid he would join in again and secure himself a place in hell. Wyckham managed to rise unsteadily from his chair and wobble off toward the deck to be rowed back to *Righteous*. The head Firefly went to follow him, but Wyckham raised his hand for her to stop without even turning to look at her.

“I’m sorry, but I am no longer in the mood for further...ah...copulative activity this evening. May I suggest that at a later date, when this evening’s warping of human physiology is somewhat behind me, we have a discussion about the human body and the conjugal acts?” Without awaiting her reply, he turned to leave.

“I do not understand,” the puzzled image of Lady Brashton called after him. “I’ve seen that you use all three of the human orifices for copulation. They are all connected, are they not? These were incorrect images we were projecting?”

Wyckham was too overwhelmed to respond as he struggled up the quarterdeck stairs. Obujimi followed close behind, holding his arms wide open in case his captain, with his foundations in noble decency so shattered, was unable to orchestrate a successful walk.



## 11

### PORT WYCKHAM BESIEGED

The following morning found Wyckham emerging from the quarterdeck stairs back aboard *Righteous* to view a typically picturesque day on Draesh. It was a perfect sailor’s day, fair with some puffy, high clouds, a squall in the distance, and a following southerly breeze pushing *Righteous* along smartly. The familiar granite cliffs to the west, home to a squawking colony of the large red gulls, told Wyckham that they were just a dozen miles from port. Screening the squadron three miles to each side were *Scamp* and *Vesuvius*, with *Leviathan* a cable off to starboard. The two jury-rigged prizes, *Trinidad* and *Cornelie*, were several cables behind, their hardworking prize crews struggling to keep station. He noted that Cochrane, a man known as an early riser, was not yet on deck. That certainly was not surprising after the goings-on aboard *Leviathan* last evening, which apparently had continued into the wee hours of the morning.

Wyckham had gotten over the events of last night, due in part to night spent with the eager Firefly leader, who had joined him in his cabin in the middle of the night. With the naked form of his childhood sweetheart beside him, it had only taken a few minutes for Wyckham to forgive her



everything. And mayhap after all, he felt satisfaction having caused such commotion among his obnoxious British and Royalist French guests?

The crew was scrubbing the deck with holystones, singing a ribald song that one of the Irish hands had taught them. Several nodded to Wyckham as he walked by. No longer did they knuckle their foreheads in salute when an officer came by as required in Royal Navy articles. Wyckham had done away with all that nonsense—this was a loyal and experienced crew that no longer needed to show deference to anyone. Unlike the pressed men who were forced onto most Royal Navy ships, these men had chosen not only to stay aboard *Righteous*, but also to remain with him on a completely different world. Just two days ago, they had once again proved that they would fight to the death whenever Wyckham asked. Hell, he should knuckle his forehead to them. They certainly didn't deserve the daily ritual of self-debasement.

Lieutenant Clifton was on the main deck working with a sextant, instructing Midshipman Moore on the taking of solar bearings. "Joy of the day, Captain." He nodded to Wyckham. "Our young gentleman here seems fully recovered, thanks to Baron Kemp's generous donation. Such a considerate man! Now Mister Moore is coming along quite well learning navigation on a planet with two suns."

Wyckham was about to quip about his own poor navigational skills when they were interrupted by a call from the lookout. "Ahoy th' deck! Signal from *Scamp*!"

Moore quickly put aside the sextant and reached for his telescope and signal book, embarrassed that the lookout had spotted the signal first. After a few moments of fiddling with both, he announced, "Cutters larboard three miles!"

*Hmpph*. What could this be? There were no cutters on Draesh other than the ones aboard the ships in this squadron. Wyckham turned to call to Obujimi for his own glass, and there was the efficient steward already handing him the fine Leica instrument. Snapping it out, he was able to just make out a group of small sails on a tight reach, headed right for them.

"Mister Clifton, I'd admire you beat the ship to quarters. Doesn't pay to be unprepared on our new world, what?" God only knew what

was coming, but *Righteous* would be ready. "Mister Moore, be so good as to signal all ships, clear for action." While this was probably nothing *Righteous* couldn't handle, you never knew around here. One thing he had learned from the Draesh was that even very small craft could carry powerful weapons.

Drummer boys beat out the call to action, bosons blew their pipes, and the ship throbbed to the sounds of 357 men hustling to prepare the ship for battle. Wyckham put his eye back to the Leica and could now make out some details as the small craft got closer. There were eight of them, making good way on a starboard tack with their gaff-rigged sails. They were about fifteen feet long and seemed to be made of hollowed-out logs from the large trees common to the planet. As they got closer, Wyckham could make out the occupants, one in each craft. They were small, bronzed, and nearly naked, more of the natives like the one Harrison had brought out of the wilderness with the Greek fire. And wasn't that their prince, Draeshpalone, in the lead boat?

A few minutes more and it was clear that it was Draeshpalone, and this flotilla was friend, not foe. "Mister Clifton, you may stand the ship down, I believe this is some sort of primitive greeting party. Prepare for taking visitors aboard. Mister Moore, be so good as to signal the squadron to secure from quarters and heave to, in irons."

Crewmen scampered aloft to raise sails and haul sheets, and the ship turned into the wind with its forward jibs backwinded. The rest of the squadron followed suit as the first boat bumped up against *Righteous*'s port side. To the pipes of the side party, Draeshpalone easily clambered up the side, looked about, and quickly turned to the smiling Wyckham. However, the small savage was not in a jovial mood.

Without ceremony, he ran up to the captain. "Captain, city under attack by Draesh! Draesh in transporter cave! Harrison says come quick!"

*Christ, it never ends around here!* Draesh with control of the transporter? They could change the portal settings and bring in their god-damned fleet, ships that could burn the entire squadron to dust in a moment. The planet would be theirs again, they would resume their intergalactic offensive, and soon even Earth would be under attack.



Not to mention the fact that Wyckham himself would be painfully tortured and devoured alive, one piece at a time. That shuddering thought thrust Wyckham to immediate action.

“Mister Moore, signal to the squadron ‘captains and firsts repair onboard.’” All his officers needed to hear the complete account from Draeshpalone and decide on a plan. They would have to quickly take back the transporter cave. And he would welcome Admiral Cochrane’s presence at this gathering. The admiral had a lot of experience in winning all sorts of battles, land and sea, and was a boost for morale besides. “Sir Thomas, could you roust the admiral and ask him to attend as well? Tell him coffee awaits.”

Within minutes, they were all in *Righteous*’s great cabin seated around its large cherry table, along with the head Firefly and several others she counseled with. The bronze native, overwhelmed by the august gathering, actually started making a leg around the group as he had learned was proper, but Wyckham cut him off. “No need for that at present—talk, sir, talk!

Draeshpalone quickly began. “You leave, Draesh attack. Some Draesh throw stones, others run through break in wall to transport cave. Captain Harrison in palace, shoots big guns, but some Draesh get into cave. Still fighting.”

Wyckham brought out a map of the city and had the little man point out the disposition of forces, along with a complete report on the battle so far.

Dozens of the monsters had rushed through the destroyed city gate, and Harrison had been forced to retreat to the palace, where he was still putting up a spirited defense. The open livestock pens and grazing areas around the transporter’s cave gave Harrison and his eighteen guns on the palace walls a clear field of fire. Whenever Draesh approached it, Harrison’s gunnery had been able to keep most of them out, but some had gotten in, and more were constantly trying. Their staging area was about two cables from the cave entrance among the warehouses and trade buildings near the docks. Other Draesh had slowly worked through the city, dueling with Harrison’s artillery by throwing massive stones. They were also bombarding one spot on the

palace wall, trying to make a practicable breach, at which point they would rush the keep and put Harrison’s artillery out of action.

The damned demons had made a fool of him again. They had obviously been planning a land assault on the city if the initial attack by the French failed, knowing Wyckham’s ships would have to give chase. Once most of Port Wyckham’s sailors and marines were gone, they were able to rush easily through the main gate, which had even been conveniently blown up in the gunnery accident.

*Jesus bloody Christ!* These damned monsters just didn’t give up. And just like in the recent naval battle, they’d resorted to throwing stones, thinking they could throw missiles better than the Earthmen could shoot them. With their long arms and immense strength, they might just be right about that. Wyckham had beaten this tactic at sea, but on land, Draeshpalone described them running about at great speed, only momentarily stopping to throw, and then dashing off again. On the approach to the city, Harrison had been unable to stop the fiends from rushing the destroyed gate, and he had been forced to retreat into the well-fortified palace. So now it was now up to the squadron to get to the city and somehow get the damned demons out of the cave, and quick. Clearly, when Draeshpalone left, there weren’t enough Draesh in the cave yet to reprogram the transporter. But this squadron needed to get to the city swiftly. Time was of the essence.

Wyckham addressed the group. “Well, nothing else for it—into the fight, and right quick. Captains will return to their ships and prepare all marines and shore party for a lightning land assault. I suggest *Vesuvius* transfer her shore party to *Leviathan*, and she will make direct for the destroyed city gate and disembark both marines and sailors under the lee of the city walls. With marines leading, this force will enter the city heading north, penetrating far enough to both get behind the foes bombarding the palace and flanking those at the cave entrance. *Righteous* will land marines and a large shore party right at the docks, enter the commercial district, and attack the cave party from behind and right flank. *Scamp* will patrol the mouth of the cove and watch for any of the big pigs coming in by water. Hard for a little brig to do this all by herself, but you’re all we can spare for picket duty. The two

prizes will stay out of the cove; no sense tempting their frog..." *Damn, Badoin is present...* "French prisoners to rise up and rejoin the fight. I further suggest both marines and shore parties take plenty of grenades; they may be the only thing we have in this fight that can hurt these big beasts. And I suggest you make a similar sketch as this one for all your officers and warrants so they get a feel for the battlefield. Your thoughts, gentlemen?"

Marine Captain McConnell nodded acceptance. Cochrane spoke up, seemingly completely recovered from the previous night. "I'd suggest you ask your lady friend here to make sure her big fishy friends are still below. If I were the Draesh admiral in this fight, I'd have some skirmishers under the water in the city's cove, ready to climb aboard our ships as soon as we get there."

"Rest assured they are here already," she answered. "They have actually called out to distant brethren in their underwater speech, which travels quite far, and there are now dozens of them swimming around your ships right now. You need not worry about an undersea attack by any Draesh."

"Well, that's good news. Should make your picket duty a claret cruise," Wyckham said to Commander Hamilton, trying to look cheerful. But all in the group remained silent, in somber thought about the coming attack. They all knew that fighting on land, without their artillery, they wouldn't have a chance against the big porcine monsters. Draesh had been hit with plenty of musket balls in previous deck fights, and it didn't seem to slow them down a bit. What would they have to do, sneak up on the creatures and shoot them in their eyes? Christ, neither sailors nor marines were trained for skirmishing. And the chances of his men killing the agile Draesh by throwing grenades was minimal. Sailors rarely used grenades and were not trained with them. And there were no cricket bowlers among the commoners who enlisted in the navy.

But help came from an unexpected source as the native prince spoke again. "Harrison send Draeshpalone here to help you. First I leave city, get quickfire dirt and black mud, now bring here. In canoes."

What was the man saying? Why, the quick-thinking Yankee Harrison had gotten the young prince to sneak through the Draesh lines back

to his village, assemble a supply of Greek fire and the highly explosive gunpowder replacement, and then get it here in a fleet of canoes! *Well, damned if this scrap hasn't just evened up a mite!*

"By God, man, you've saved the day! We'll make Greek fire cartridges for all our small arms! Any sodding Draesh gets within musket range will wish he hadn't. With this stuff, we can shoot holes right through the buggers. Mister Rawlins, would you be so kind as to get above and start moving this ammunition aboard, and send some full canoes to *Leviathan* and *Vesuvius*? For God's sake, make sure you keep the two Greek fire elements apart. The rest of you gentlemen, get your crews making lots of Greek fire cartridges for your shore parties' pistols and muskets. And also make up some grapeshot fireballs for the great guns to fire when we approach the city. Captain Randolph, I'd admire you supervise the construction of these munitions. The big greasy bastards are afraid of this stuff. Mayhap we can keep their heads down when we dock so they can't throw half the city at us."

The assembled officers had all brightened their visages. With this deadly ammunition, they actually had a chance in the coming land assault. Now any pistol or musket could fell a Draesh! A buzz of optimism filled the room. Captain McConnell banged his hand on the table and exclaimed, "And that black ooze will make for excellent grenades for my lads! Perfect for a scrap in city streets and clearing the rotten beasts out of the cave's tunnels."

"Cracking idea, Captain! Take all you want; it's too powerful for my ships' guns. Your marines will be able to blow the monsters to hell with these black ooze grenades. Matter of fact, each ship should make some and pass them out to every sailor as well."

Everyone continued to excitedly discuss preparations except Draeshpalone, who still seemed agitated. Wyckham noticed his anxious fidgeting and turned to him.

"My lad, thanks to you, the day is surely won." Wyckham was by no means sure of that, but men before a fight must always be assured of victory. "Yet you seem concerned about something. Might you enlighten us to any reservations you may have?"

His explanation stopped the room's reverie cold. "Draesh find secret place of Garoshen quickfire. Dig up quickfire, bring to city. Put in ant gun. Practice shooting quickfire into water. Ant cannon shoot very far."

*Shite!* The Draesh had watched the new clay gun in action during the initial battle for the city and had dug it up! The thing had gotten buried in the explosion, but it was probably near indestructible, and all the Draesh had to do was remount it. And in a depressing, horrific thought, Wyckham realized they surely knew how to use it. Undoubtedly several of the loathsome creatures would have devoured some of the sailors fighting in the city, and by consuming them, they would have picked up the knowledge of firing a great gun. With this gun the ants had made, loaded with the black ooze and Greek fire, the foe could pick off the squadron one by one during its approach, just as Wyckham had done with the French ships. By the time his ships were in range to fire back, they would all be burning wrecks.

The room was deadly quiet as this new information sank in. Except for Captain Randolph of the bomb ketch *Vesuvius*, who was tapping his fingers on the table. It appeared the young officer was mulling over an idea.

"Your thoughts, Captain Randolph?" asked Wyckham. "Might you have a solution to the problem of safely approaching the port?"

Randolph, as the explosives expert among them all, had been intrigued with the possibilities of the powerful black ooze ever since it had been discovered, and he had spent lots of time fiddling with it back in the city.

*Vesuvius's* captain stopped drumming his fingers and spoke in a slow, considerate tone. "I watched that gun in action three days ago. While it can probably shoot over ten miles with that black explosive, its accurate range is only about two miles. The mortars on *Vesuvius* can shoot two miles, but with no accuracy. My mortars couldn't hit a ship of the line at that distance, much less take out that one gun. The radius of a thirteen-inch mortar shell's explosion is maybe fifty feet. I doubt *Vesuvius* could drop one within two hundred feet of a target at that distance.

"But by my calculations," he continued, "if we fill some shells with the black stuff, the resulting explosion will be about thirteen times more powerful than one stuffed with gunpowder. That explosion would destroy everything within about three hundred feet and would surely shock foes silly for a much greater distance. Give me a couple of tries, and I believe I could drop a shell close enough to wipe out the crew on that ant gun, and probably set off their Greek fire as well. But I'll have to get within range of that gun, and that thing's a hell of a lot more accurate than my mortars. I don't know if my ship will last long enough to get a shell on target. While I'm trying to find the right combination of direction, charge, and fuse length, they can just aim and fire. One hit, and *Vesuvius* is just a puff of vapors."

Wyckham grimly realized what he and *Righteous* would have to do. It would be dangerous. But it was what any Royal Navy captain would do in such an important battle.

"All right, then I'll sail *Righteous* into the cove first and draw their fire. They hate me and my ship like a pox. Once they sight me they'll go berserk trying to get at me. Hopefully they'll be so focused on burning me to cinders that they won't be paying attention to *Vesuvius* getting in range."

He looked solemnly at Randolph. "*Righteous* is fast and handy. We won't be an easy target; we'll put on a real show of ship maneuvering. But do your best to bring a shell down on that gun. Those evil bastards aren't stupid. At some point, they'll anticipate the next step *Righteous* makes in the dance and she'll be done for.

He turned to Commander Hamilton. "Once *Vesuvius* takes out that gun, *Scamp* will sail right up to the shore there and guard that gun site. Don't let any of the big pigs get back on the gun." He turned and addressed Capitaine Badoin. "As soon as that gun stops firing, *Leviathan* and *Righteous* will begin their run at the shore to disembark their landing forces. After *Vesuvius* has silenced the enemy gun, she will anchor off the quay, mount springs, and support the shore party according to signals." In the initial fight for the station months ago, a midshipman ashore using signal flags had directed mortar fire from *Vesuvius*, successfully panicking thousands of Krag and winning the

battle. Since then, *Vesuvius* had practiced land bombardment with forward observers and was now quite respectable at it. “And anchor where you have a clear line of sight to the palace. Harrison might signal you for some support as well. Gentlemen, your thoughts?”

All the officers accepted the arrangements, but all knew it would be a very difficult plan to pull off. *Righteous* would have to maneuver constantly while under fire. Any luff from a change in the wind or a mishandled sail could be all the damned Draesh needed with that long-range gun. *Vesuvius* would have to make bombs of an entirely new explosive, then hit a target two miles away while moving, instead of being anchored with maneuvering springs. If she was successful, the landing force would still have to defeat the giant Draesh in hand-to-hand fighting, inland, away from the support of naval guns. And they’d have to do it all at lightning speed. Once the enemy caught sight of the returning squadron, they’d rush the work on the transporter to bring in their own unstoppable ships.

The officers somberly departed to get their ships underway and prepare for the coming fight. They had a tall order to complete, but they knew it was the only course to take. This was going to be one tough scrap.



12

## THE SECOND BATTLE OF PORT WYCKHAM

The squadron entered the cove to the sights and sounds of a city clearly under siege. Even from four miles away, Wyckham could hear the rhythmic thuds of great guns being steadily worked. Vast white clouds of gun smoke drifted lazily across the city. With his Leica telescope and his perch high in the foremast crosstrees, Wyckham could see the remains of a temporary second wall that the defenders had built behind the destroyed city gate. The giant monsters had been able to tear it apart, as evidenced by the cast-off stonework scattered around the area, and had rushed into the city. Lifting his glass, he could see the palace under bombardment from thrown stonework, with several holes in her gilded dome. On the eastern side of the city, a score of fires were burning, their plumes of black smoke rising up to form an angled grid in the sky.

Another gun crashed out, and Wyckham turned his telescope back to the palace. He saw a line of thirty-two-pounders being robustly worked, their crews swarming about the hot gun barrels to swab, worm,

reload, and run out. To their left was a V-shaped breach in the palace wall that reached halfway to the ground. As he watched, he saw a large piece of stonework fly up from an unseen spot in the city and strike the wall just to the left of the huge crack, causing several more stones to fall from the growing breach.

But the American was still putting up a good fight, attested to by the several dark masses writhing in obvious pain that were strewn around the palace's dry moat. It was a deadly contest of cat-and-mouse. Harrison had to guess where a stone-throwing Draesh would pop out from next so he could have a gun ready and targeted on that spot. His giant foes, for their part in the game, were throwing stones to take out his guns or further work open the developing breach, all the while trying to avoid getting blasted with a load of grapeshot.

Lowering his glass slightly, he made out three Draesh crouched down behind a sheet-metal grain silo in the warehouse district. All together, they darted out into the street and threw large building stones, then ducked back behind the silo. Jesus, some of the flying stones were as big as horse carts! One of the stones hit right at the base of the developing breach, and more stonework crashed to the ground.

But Harrison was onto them. Three of his guns quickly fired, hitting the silo protecting them with solid six-inch roundshot. The tower fell in on itself, leaving two of the big demons momentarily exposed and partially buried by the avalanche of grain. Just as the powerful creatures broke free and stood up, another gun loaded with grapeshot fired, and both the beasts were peppered by the dozens of the egg-size balls. Squealing in pain, they struggled behind other buildings, at least seriously wounded if not mortally so. Wyckham nodded his head in approval at the savvy American's artillery work.

But he was steadily losing this battle. Stones were being thrown almost continuously from several locations in the city, and Harrison couldn't target them all. By the time he'd shifted his guns to bear on the next target, four more stones had crashed into the wall, and the breach widened farther, dropping more debris to add to the growing entry ramp.

Wyckham dropped his glass farther to view the base of the palace wall and saw a zigzag line of earth extending near the dry moat.

Textbook siege warfare included digging trenchworks close to the walls from which the besiegers could emerge in a final rush. The whole scene showed that one of the big demons had eaten some human with knowledge of siege warfare and assimilated it into his own brain, as the Draesh could do. *Rotting bastards*. Probably consumed one of the French officers missing at Hollow Mountain and immediately absorbed his experience besieging a city. But unlike in a French siege, there would be no offer to the town for a peaceful surrender.

It wouldn't be long from now before these flying stones caused a "serviceable breach." Then Draesh in the trenches would rise up and rush into the gap in the walls, and the palace would fall. And without Harrison's guns covering the transporter cave, the Draesh would flood in and quickly bring in their fleet.

An especially loud retort attracted Wyckham's attention as three guns on the south wall blasted away, all at once. Their big six-inch balls hit the vulnerable end of the trench line where Draesh were digging a traverse, knocking down the protective dirt mound at its corner. Immediately three more guns fired, this time with grapeshot, kicking up dirt all around the traverse. With their shielding momentarily gone, some of the big ogres in the traverse were hit and started emitting their irritating squeals. Smart shooting by the Yankee privateer once again.

A thirty-two-pound naval cannon could fire over sixty egg-size balls with a double load of grapeshot. One ball in the right place could bring down one of the big monsters, and a discharge from close range would turn the giants into gruesome hash. Wyckham hoped the squealing demons out there were dying in slow and painful agony.

But within moments, dirt was flying up again as the entrenched demons dug furiously with their immense webbed hands, and a protective mound quickly grew back around the traverse. Soon another mound appeared on the new trench line, the dangerous switchback was a *fait accompli*, and the giant pigs continued their slow advance toward the growing breach.

Wyckham shifted his glass to the city's eastern wall above the docks. The fires there were very evenly spaced, maybe fifty feet from each



other. Who was burning what? As they sailed closer, Wyckham could see that the fires were all atop the city walls.

He realized again it was more good planning by Harrison. While retreating, he had set fire to the wooden trucks of the guns mounted along the northern wall, and the gun barrels had fallen useless to the ground. Harrison had realized his only hope of relief was a landing by the returning squadron, and he'd removed the threat that those guns posed to any ship disembarking troops into the city. Otherwise, the Draesh would have manned those guns as well and made it impossible for the squadron's ships to dock. Knowing Harrison, Wyckham suspected he'd spiked the guns as well, hammering nails into their touchholes in case the huge beasts attempted to manhandle the guns around without their wooden carriages. Thanks to the intelligent action of the American privateer, there was at least one threat less to manage.

Movement at the city's northern edge caught his eye. He moved his glass over just as a score of Draesh broke from cover and sprinted across the open field fronting the transporter cave entrance. But before they'd moved even a hundred feet, several guns crashed out along the palace's eastern wall. Six-inch roundshot bounced through the rushing beasts, severing limbs and sending several of the towering fiends tumbling across the grass like tenpins on the Westminster Palace lawn. More guns fired, and clouds of grapeshot swept the tall grass like a scythe, sweeping away more of the charging enemy. Most of the few survivors turned back toward the safety of city buildings, but two brave souls kept running for the cave's entrance. Two guns held in reserve fired their grapeshot loads, blasting one of them into mincemeat, but the other made it to the rock wall and disappeared into the entrance tunnel. One more Draesh to help reprogram the transporter and bring in their fleet.

Well, it was definitely time to begin the relief of Port Wyckham. The captain descended to the deck by sliding down a ratline like any common sailor, giving an eye to his squadron. *Righteous* was leading the way on a dead run, with *Vesuvius* trailing by a few cables. As *Scamp* entered the cove, she hauled her wind and made a broad larboard reach for the southern side of the cove, keeping close enough to drop off to a fast run to shore once the ant gun was taken out of the fight. As

*Leviathan* entered the cove, she turned onto a starboard reach to wait for the gun's demise as well. Only *Righteous* made straight for the city. Wyckham felt like some foolish stag heading right toward the hunting party. Well, time to get ready for the hounds.

"Mr. Rawlins, shall we begin? I suggest getting your best topmen aloft and your strongest hands on the sheets. For starters, let's shake out reefs and set topgallants." He momentarily considered mounting studsails, but they would do nothing for the ship except on a run, and he expected to sail *Righteous* mostly on reaches as the ship maneuvered to avoid enemy fire. Nor did he have the ship beat to quarters yet; no sense doing that right now. There were a lot of dances on the evening's card, and they would take some time to perform. No shooting for a while. *Righteous* would be polite and let her foe take the first step.

The frigate's most experienced topmen scrambled aloft like squirrels, while the biggest hands in the crew assembled on the sheets to haul the big square sails around. Her mainsails filled with loud cracks as they were unreefed, her topgallants were set, and the ship heeled over and surged ahead. Masts creaked as the following wind pressed them forward. Rope stays started humming with the stress, their pitch going up steadily as Rawlins made minute corrections to each sail's trim to capture the most air.

Like a fine-bred racing steed, *Righteous* quickly left the rest of the convoy behind. Sixth-rate thirty-eight-gun frigates were the fastest ships in the Royal Navy. Creamy water from the bow wave extended back halfway down the side as a crewman with a knotted rope astern chanted out her speed. "Nine...ten...eleven... twelve...twelve and a half knots, sor!" Handled properly, she would be damned hard to hit at distance for even the most experienced gunners..

Back on Earth, *Righteous* could manage only eight knots, even under perfect conditions. But here on Freeport, the seawater contained strange oils that actually lubricated the passage of ships. On top of that, some of the octopi-like creatures had coated the ship's copper-clad bottom with some kind of slippery paste, which hardened to a glass-like coating and increased the ship's speed even further. Add the calm seas in the cove to the steady twenty-knot wind, and the



inexperienced beasts ashore manning the long-range gun had their work cut out for them. Wyckham kept the ship running dead west, waiting for the first shot from the enemy. *Let's see if you pigs can keep up with the dancing of HMS Righteous.*

It came a few minutes later, when *Righteous* had sailed to within three miles of the port's shoreline. With a crash far louder than the firing from Harrison's thirty-twos, the enemy made its first ranging shot. Wyckham marked the position of the second hand on his Lange and Shone watch. He would track the time between shots and use it to plan his ship's defensive maneuvers. When he looked back up, terror froze him for a split second he saw the fireball hung motionless in the air, just growing. That meant it was coming right at him! Christ, they'd gotten him with their first shot! But then it dropped, falling at least a half mile short and off to starboard. Wyckham exhaled hard and tried to get his concentration back on his ship.

The enemy had started firing early to get a feel for the windage, exactly what Wyckham would have done. He waited for their second shot, and it came well adjusted for wind and right online, though it still fell well short. Damned creatures seemed to have some understanding of artillery. His watch was telling him that they had reloaded and fired the gun in two and a half minutes, not bad for a new gun crew. The third shot also came around two and a half minutes later, this time splashing down only two cables off.

That was close enough. It was time for *Righteous's* first steps in the dance. Wyckham now concentrated on his watch face, counting off the seconds. After one minute, he bellowed out, "Larboard side, prepare to haul wind!" Hands pulled the sheets tight and looked up to await the order. At exactly two minutes, Wyckham called out, "Haul, lads, haul! Helmsman, east nor' east!"

Crewman hauled in their ropes, blocks rumbled, the helmsman spun the wheel, and *Righteous* turned smartly to larboard with barely a ripple in her sails. Just as she settled in on the new course, the shore gun fired, dropping the flaming ball to hiss and bubble about a cable astern. Fooled them that time. But next time, they'd be closer. Each step in this dance would have to be perfectly executed.

At one minute from the last shot, he shouted out, "Port side haul! Helm to dead west!" *Righteous* returned to her previous course and picked up speed with the following wind. Soon the speedy frigate was doing close to twelve knots again. The two-and-a-half-minute mark came without a shot. Finally the gun boomed at the three-minute mark, this time sending the ball overhead to fall in line but well behind.

Now the guessing game began. If it were Wyckham on that gun, next shot he'd do something different. Probably hold fire at the two-and-a-half-minute mark to see what new course the ship turned to, then adjust and take the shot. Maybe that was what they had just done, explaining the late shot? *Then it's time for a two-step.*

At the three-minute mark, he had the ship turn to a starboard reach, waited until the ship steadied on the new course, counted thirty seconds, then had the ship turn back to port on the same dead run straight west. Just as *Righteous* started the turn, the gun fired again, its shot landing a cable length to larboard, damned close to where the ship would have been if it had remained on the starboard reach. Wyckham couldn't help but smirk a tight-lipped smile. *Fooled you again, hey, little piggies?*

But now *Righteous* was within a mile of shore, a far easier target to hit. Where the hell was *Vesuvius*? Just as he turned to look astern, he heard the reassuring crash of one of her big siege mortars. There she was, about a mile off to the southeast, under all plain sail on a larboard reach. As he watched, her second mortar fired as well. Rather than wasting precious time waiting to see where the first shot went, Randolph had made some guesses on powder charge, fuse length, and direction, and fired an immediate second shot.

*Vesuvius's* first shot landed a quarter mile short with a long fuse, hitting the water and sinking quietly. The second shell also landed short, but its fuse must have been cut shorter, because it exploded about two hundred feet in the air with a very impressive detonation. Wyckham had never heard nor felt an explosion anywhere near as large. Though the ship was a half mile away, Wyckham's hat flew off, and all *Righteous's* sails rippled.

But Randolph was too far away from the target for accurate fire. *Vesuvius* would have to drop off and run in closer, then turn sideways

so her mortars would bear again. Which meant that Wyckham would be under fire for at least another ten minutes or so. Plenty of time for the enemy gunners to score that one fatal hit on *Righteous*.

Wyckham had kept the ship on the same course, hoping that his growing proximity would keep the Draesh gun crew focused on him. Now he gave orders and had the ship jibe around to a larboard tack, actually pulling away from the shore. Sure enough, the next shot from the ant gun splashed down between the ship and the shoreline. Next he gave orders for the ship to come about to a starboard tack, now starting to feel confident that he could keep one step ahead of the demons' aim.

But their next shot dashed his sudden optimism. This time they ignored *Righteous* completely and fired their gun at *Vesuvius*. After seeing the tremendous explosion of her second shell, the Draesh had finally realized where the real threat was coming from. And *Vesuvius* couldn't maneuver like Wyckham's frigate; hitting her would be far easier. *Righteous* would have to draw her fire again. He would have to make *Righteous* the bigger threat, and that meant sailing closer to shore and getting those bastards to worry about a broadside from the frigate.

"Mister Rawlins, time to show our teeth. Get the ship cleared for action, if you would. Get your best gunners on the port side. Quoins out." With the wedge-shaped quoins removed, the guns were at maximum elevation for the long range. He was going to try to annoy that gun crew ashore enough to get them shooting at him instead of *Vesuvius*. Turning toward the waist, Wyckham bellowed out, "Starboard side haul!" then, "Helm dead north!" to the two men on the wheel. A minute later, *Righteous* was headed toward shore and closing fast. Her gunports banged open and the big eighteen-pounders banged ominously up against the port-side bulwarks in a clear message to the foes onshore. *The dreaded Captain Wyckham is coming!* Hopefully, the enemy would direct their fire back toward *Righteous* again and let *Vesuvius* get safely in range. He was actually hoping that another deadly fireball would be flying at him soon, and from an even closer range. *Christ, I must be daft for doing this.*

Now he was close enough to make out details ashore through his Leica telescope. Scanning the base of the city walls, he quickly spotted

the dangerous gun getting fussed over by a crew of Draesh and some Krag helpers, its long brown barrel poked out from a redoubt built from rubble near the main city gate. He watched as the attending monsters reloaded the gun and backed off to run it out, now aiming it at *Righteous* again. Wyckham shouted, "Helm, two points east." Better keep jiggling about. He kept watching the muzzle of the deadly gun, trying to read how well the crew was adjusting the aim to his new course. The gun crew moved it a little right, then back a bit. To Wyckham's eye, it was still trailing the ship. The gun fired, the flaming ball first coming right at them but splashing down a cable ahead. *Whew!* Wyckham raised his eyebrows, shook his head, and loudly exhaled—that was pretty damned close. Thank God for the following wind; the Draesh gunners hadn't yet adjusted for it.

Looking astern, he saw *Vesuvius* still on a full run toward shore. She'd have to turn to a reach again before her mortars would bear. *Righteous's* cat-and-mouse game would have to continue. Well, maybe the mouse could strike first.

"Helm to east-nor'-east! Mister Rawlins, you may fire as your guns bear." *Righteous* would turn to a reach as well so her own broadside could aim at the threat. She was now about a half mile from shore, within range of the small target, though it was very hard to hit anything at that distance. But maybe they'd get lucky, or at least put a little fear in the filthy buggers.

The nimble ship came crisply to the new course. "Ready port battery!" bellowed Rawlins. "At the top of the uproll..." he would use the ship's rolling motion to get a few degrees extra elevation for the guns. "Fire!"

The ship shook to the discharge of the sixteen big guns, orange flames spewing from the muzzles, followed by billowing clouds of white smoke. All the officers put telescopes to their eyes, looking for the fall of shot. After a few seconds, they saw balls bouncing about the rubble ashore, kicking up dust and throwing rock shards around, some of them fairly close to the enemy gun position. But Wyckham doubted they'd done any harm.

His doubts were confirmed when the foe's gun fired again, the crash of the discharge deafening this close. And clearly he had been

successful in getting the foes' attention back on *Righteous*, because the shot was coming right at him. Wyckham's heart rose in his throat as he saw a glowing yellow ball hanging motionless in the air. It was coming right at him!

The flaming ball was roaring as it went over Wyckham's head by just a few feet, passing though the spanker. While it landed harmlessly in the sea, the spanker sail immediately burst into flame. Before Wyckham could even shout an order, a nearby crewman pulled out his dirk and cut the sail's sheet so it flew free. Then another hand quickly freed its halyard, and with the wind abeam, the flaming sail was quickly blown downwind to land harmlessly in the sea.

Thank God for good crew! A few seconds more, and the burning spanker would have set the big mizzensail alight, and the whole ship would have gone up in flames. "Well done, lads, well done!" But the incident had momentarily broken the rhythm of the ship. Any sailor would react in terror at the sight of fire onboard and forget his duty. "Back to your guns now, lads. Let's see if we can disconcert the gentlemen ashore enough to spoil their aim."

As a result, *Righteous*'s second broadside was pretty ragged, some guns firing well before the last one went off. Wyckham kept his glass on the enemy gun emplacement, but didn't see any shots come near. There was too much rubble protecting the gun. *Righteous*'s eighteen-pound balls just couldn't bounce home with all the broken stonework lying about.

But as the smoke cleared, he did see the foe's gun getting run out for another shot. Christ, he shouldn't have stayed around for that second useless broadside. He should have changed course instead of staying on this reach parallel to the shoreline, which made the ship a much larger target. And the last shot had almost hit *Righteous*, so the next one would require only a minor aiming correction. *Quick, take action, Wyckham!*

"Helm alee! Due west!"

The ship dropped off into a dead run at shore, hopefully reducing its profile. Wyckham put his glass back to his eye and saw the big clay gun bump to a stop. Damn, but the muzzle looked right on its

target—him. Through his excellent telescope, the magnified muzzle hole suddenly looked horrifyingly deep and dark. And with its load of magical fire, it certainly could be the entry port to hell for Wyckham.

He watched as the Krag preparing the firelock stepped aside and handed the lanyard to one of the monstrous Draesh. Damned if the filthy beast wasn't looking right at him! It held the firing cord up high so that Wyckham could see it, toying with him before he fired, a leering grin on its phiz. It was too late for another course change—the cat-and-mouse game was over, and Wyckham had lost.

Suddenly the whole scene ashore rocked to a gigantic explosion. *Vesuvius* must have fired during *Righteous*'s last broadside, and one of her mortar shells packed with the new high explosive had just exploded high in the air above the shore! While its fuse had been cut too short and it had gone off hundreds of feet above the city, the force of the detonation sent a jarring shock wave over both *Righteous* and the foes ashore. The big swine about to fire the ant gun lost his footing as the rubble he was standing on shifted, and he dropped the gun's lanyard to steady himself. But within an instant he'd picked it back up, about to fire.

However, Wyckham wasn't even watching him—his eyes were tracking a smoke trail descending in the air above the enemy gun. It was the smoldering fuse from a second shot from *Vesuvius*! In the seconds of its descent, his mind went through a dozen prayers. *For God's sake, don't explode yet! Hold off! Hold off! Belay detonating for another two hundred feet!*

The thirteen-inch shell Crawfordated exactly as asked, not exploding until it was a mere hundred feet from the ground, slightly behind the enemy gun emplacement. This lower explosion shook the entire beach, leveling the stones piled about the gun and knocking the whole enemy gun crew to the ground. But even though the explosion was terrific, Wyckham knew some Draesh must have survived, and the monstrous swine would continue to fight, even if seriously wounded.

Sure enough, several beasts at the fringe of the blast ran in to serve the gun. But firing the gun again was not to be. As Randolph had predicted, the shock of the mortar shell had ripped open some of the Greek fire cartridges, setting them alight and blowing the flaming

rounds all about. Apparently one flaming ball touched off the black propellant charges stacked by the gun, and the whole scene was suddenly erased in a whitewash of light, explosion, and heat. An immense flash consumed everything on the beach, followed by a very short, crisp blast of sound that shook Wyckham's stomach and rattled the frigate's rigging. The gigantic white fireball quickly faded, revealing a sky filled with flaming orange fireballs and flying stonework. A mountainous pillar of smoke and dust had been kicked up from the beach, churning and billowing upward into a giant toadstool, reaching well into the sky above the city. Flying debris holed several sails aboard *Righteous*, but fortunately, none of the canvas caught fire.

Out of the smoke, one of the giant Draesh came flying right toward Wyckham, its huge mouth open, ready to devour him. *Good God, these things are flying at me now?* But as it dropped to the deck, he saw that it was only one of the monsters' heads, completely severed from its body, leaving a trail of red mist behind it in the air. With a loud bang, it landed in a bloody splatter right on the main deck, bounced across the ship, and spun over the starboard gunwales to splash overboard.

That raised an eyebrow on his first lieutenant's brow. "Well, there's one fellow decided to depart the fight. I expect the rest of his porcine mates on that gun have left the field as well, 'ey?"

Interrupting Rawlins's commentary, an entire haunch of one of the giant pigs landed just above them on the poop deck with a resounding crash. While nearby crewmen jumped in surprise, Wyckham and Rawlins had to stay calm and slowly turn to view the scene.

"And here's his leg," continued Rawlins, completing his observations. "Rather gracious of the foe to provide fresh pork leg for the hands' meal tonight. But I don't imagine the gentleman needs it any longer."

At the mention of fresh meat, faces lit up on the nearby crewmen, and several rushed to haul the giant ham below. Wyckham started to order a halt to their plans and just throw the gory thing over the side, which would be the correct thing for an officer to do in this circumstance. But then he realized he no longer cared about the Royal Navy Officer's Code and instead thought about what fresh pork would do

for crew morale. The squadron had left in a rush, completely unprepared for sea, without any fresh provisions. With a momentary break in the battle right now, let the crew talk up a pork dinner instead of thinking about the land fight still to come.

Wyckham relaxed himself for a moment as crewmen dumped water buckets on the deck to wash the demon's gore out through the scuppers. He also realized he was pleased with the grisly demise of so many Draesh that he'd just witnessed. These were foes with no decency. He would never show the foul things consideration nor mercy; Wyckham inwardly rejoiced in the deaths he had just caused to those ashore.

The first part of the fight had ended. *But get a move on, Wyckham!* No time for reflection. "Helm, make for the quays. Mister Moore, please run up numbers for *Leviathan* and *Vesuvius*, followed by 'attack.'" That was probably unnecessary; he suspected the two ships' captains knew exactly what to do now. Sure enough, as Wyckham looked back, he saw both ships falling off for a run straight at the docks. But he did need to signal Harrison in the palace. "And Mister Moore, also be so good as to run up an American flag followed by 'cover landing' and 'direct *Vesuvius*.'" Harrison, ashore in the palace, had no flag number, but the signal should get him the intended message. Wyckham wanted him to use his artillery to keep the foes heads' down as the landing force disembarked, and to direct mortar fire from *Vesuvius* to wherever he saw an opportunity on the battlefield. With his position atop the palace, Harrison would have a clear view of the coming fight.

*Righteous* changed course back toward the quay to land its men behind the enemy forces attacking the cave. With the wind at her back, it shouldn't take more than a few minutes for *Righteous* to tie up at the docks and disembark her landing party.

A glowing light, clearly one of the Fireflies, appeared near the area of the cave entrance and started making its way through the air toward them. But as it passed over the docks, the light seemed to waver and lose some intensity. He heard a gasp and turned to his left to see the Firefly Lady Brashton clearly concerned, her hands to her face, acting like a human who had just lost a friend. He then looked back toward shore to see the glowing ball grow dark and then fall into the sea. The

Lady Brashton at his side momentarily hung her head but then quickly roused herself and addressed Wyckham.

“Captain, you must make for the cave immediately. One of my inner council has just sacrificed herself to tell me that the Draesh in the cave have the transporter nearly reprogrammed. She estimated they would be bringing in their ships within the hour. You must make all haste.”

“Madam, I assure you we are doing so. I expect to be landing the shore raid within minutes.” He didn’t mention that there was still the matter of a very hard fight ahead. No telling how long it would take to get to the control room through a cordon of the behemoth swine and their Krag allies.

“She died to tell us that,” the Firefly continued, mourning the loss. “She had been hidden in the cave, but she had to expose herself to get close enough to me for communication in this physical world. The Draesh around the cave entrance saw her and absorbed all her energy, something they can do to us. It’s why they have been so successful against us. I cannot go near them in a mass-based world like this one. I must leave you now. Good luck.”

It appeared the Draesh had devoured another good soul. Christ, these things wanted to eat everything in the universe. As he watched the glowing orb that had just been Lady Brashton float off, he was once again reminded of the importance of stopping the Draesh from returning to this world.

“Mister Rawlins, a change of plan. There is no time for a proper docking. Keep all sails full; we’ll run her up to the quay full speed to save time. Any damage can be repaired later.” *If there is a later.* “Get the kedge anchor ready to slow us down at the last moment.” Rawlins headed aft to prepare the kedge anchor to be dropped off the stern. Wyckham snapped his telescope back out and scanned over the dock area. He could see several of the huge demons along with dozens of Krag crouched alongside buildings, taking cover from Harrison’s guns. “Mister Rawlins, ready the port battery to fire on the shoreline as we tie up, if you would, grape over ball.” The guns were already loaded with roundshot, but since the range would be very short, he could

add a load of grapeshot to each gun. Sixteen guns with that double load, shooting at foes pinned up against the buildings, should create an absolute hellstorm for the evil bastards when *Righteous* pulled up to the quay.

Now he saw that Harrison had clearly gotten the message. Three guns on the palace walls fired and bounced roundshot through the streets next to the docks. He saw several foes take wounds from flying brickwork while others dug frantically in rubble piles for protection. He hoped the dust thrown in the air would obscure the ships from the enemy, but he doubted that. *Righteous* could anticipate a warm reception.

The rest of the ship seemed ready. His marine captain, McConnell, had his company assembled by the port gangway, ready to be first off. Both marines and sailors had their firearms loaded with Greek fireballs, and they were itching to try them out. And with all the small arms taken from the two French prizes, the sailors had plenty of pistols. Many had several dangling about their necks, tied together with strings through the trigger guards. They would go into this fight without the usual need to stop and reload. Loblolly boys passed out grenadoes and then lit the slow matches they would carry for lighting the grenadoes’ fuses.

Obujimi approached with a string full of pistols and hung it around Wyckham’s neck. Unsaid was that as captain, Wyckham was supposed to stay with the ship during a land action; his First Lieutenant Rawlins should be leading any land sortie. But Obujimi understood his captain well and knew that he wasn’t going to be out of this one. He also handed over two of the Greek fire grenadoes and a cartridge belt with bulging pouches. Wyckham felt equipped for a solo assault on the Tower of London.

But then Cochrane emerged from the wardroom gallery, carrying enough weapons to arm a regiment. Not only did he have two strings of pistols around his neck and four grenadoes hanging from his coat, but he also carried a massive Nock seven-barreled volley gun. Wyckham had heard of the things but had never seen one. It had six barrels arranged in a circle around a seventh in their center; one



flintlock set them all off. It had been designed for sweeping an enemy deck, but due to its great weight and punishing kick, few had ever been used. Completing Cochrane's personal armament was a heavy cavalry saber held in a frog at his side. How Cochrane could carry the gun, the heavy sword, and what must be at least a dozen pistols was beyond Wyckham's ken. And of course, he wore a full dress admiral's uniform.

"Admiral, you look prepared to take on Napoleon's entire Imperial Guard all by yourself," Wyckham observed as he walked over. "My respects, sir, but this will not be a *pique-nique* on the lawn. I thought you were only going to be an observer on this planet."

"Wouldn't miss this for all the doxies in Portsmouth," the Irishman replied. "Just lead the way, Captain. I'll be off your right shoulder."

Wyckham was certainly pleased to have the famous hero with him in this fight. He nodded and turned to face the assembled crew. Standing on the quarterdeck, he knew it was now the time for some words from the captain to the force assembled below. He looked over the men's faces and saw the usual grim looks before a battle—but also eagerness to get at the foe. Nearly every man aboard had lost a friend in the Battle of Hollow Mountain, and many had even watched as mates were devoured alive, piecemeal. Maybe it wasn't grimness he saw on their faces but a thirst for revenge?

"*Righteous*, I'm sure you know what's at stake here. The big demons are at the controls of the transporter, trying to bring in their fleet. If those ships make it here, not only are we done for, but they'll get to everyone back in England, probably within a year. So we must get to the portal controls feverish quick, like hounds with the fox in sight. You can load all your firearms with a double load, since these flame balls we're shooting don't weigh much and they don't have to hit very hard to burn through anything. Especially these soft piggies. Won't they get a surprise at what a pistol can now do to them, 'ey?" That got a raucous response from the crew—clearly they were looking forward to taking on the Draesh now that they had the Greek fire. "Once it starts," Wyckham continued, "keep advancing and shooting. Don't stop for anything until we get to the transporter room and take the place. Use the skirmishing drill that Captain Harrison taught you." The American

had once drilled all the squadron's sailors in skirmishing tactics for boarding a ship, advancing in pairs so the first man could take a firing position to cover his partner leapfrogging forward. "If a mate falls, keep going. Our Slick surgeon will be following right behind."

He turned to address his marine captain. "Mister McConnell, I'd admire you lead the way. I'd recommend your men fix bayonets; the porcine beasts have their Krag with them, and big ones, too." He turned back to the main deck. "And everyone be ready for a bit of a bump when the ship hits the quay. Grab on now to something, or you'll be flat on your arse while your mates beat you to the fight." That brought out some laughs, and Wyckham felt the tension ease.

He made a slow spin to address everyone. "So huzzah, *Righteous*! Today we fight for the ship, for England, and for the entire Earth!"

"And for the Ruptured Krag!" It was Crawford, reminding the hands of the Fireflies' tavern, the most wonderful thing any sailor had ever dreamed of. The answering hollers and huzzahs confirmed that Crawford had brought up what sailors really would fight for—drink and women. *Well, whatever gets the men fired up.*

They were close enough now for hidden Draesh ashore to start throwing missiles, and chunks of broken stonework started to rain down on them. A stone as big as a horse crashed into some marines, mashing two of them into pulp. Better start firing back. Wyckham had wanted to get closer before firing the port battery at the shoreline so that the first broadside would be more of a shock. The ship was still a cable off from shore, her guns loaded with grape over roundshot, a combination that should shred the nearby sheet-metal buildings and any foes using them.

"Helm, two points starboard!" Turning slightly to starboard would aim the port battery's guns at the shore. "Mister Rawlins, you may fire as your guns bear. Target the buildings around the docks." Fortunately, the commercial side of the city was on elevated ground behind the city wall, and *Righteous* had a clear field of fire around the area the flying stones were coming from.

Rawlins nodded and kept his eye on the shoreline. "Port battery... ready..." He was waiting for the ship to finish its turn. Suddenly, a



building stone the size of a water cask shot out from behind a dock-side shop and flew right toward him. Rawlins saw it coming but kept his concentration on the shoreline. He didn't twitch a muscle, even though the huge missile was right on course for his head. A Royal Navy officer simply did not bob his head like a duck to avoid enemy fire. "Fire!" the lieutenant finally shouted, just as the stone flew by. It missed his head by mere inches and splashed to starboard, the wind of its passing spinning Rawlins's hat around like a child's top on his head. The port battery exploded in a crisp broadside, rocking the ship as the big eighteen-pounders discharged in stabs of flame and roiling clouds of white smoke.

The effect ashore was gratifying. The eighteen-pound roundshot sent the lightweight metal walls spinning through the streets, knocking down other buildings and removing the enemies' cover. Wyckham saw three Draesh fall, hit by some of the hundreds of grape balls that had fallen short and bounced along the stone streets. Others dropped the stones they were about to throw and frantically headed for new cover—a wise decision, in Wyckham's view. Additional havoc fell on the huge creatures as Harrison's battery behind them blasted out a volley, sending their thirty-two-pound shot bouncing through the lightweight buildings, the heavy balls throwing jagged debris everywhere.

"Good shooting there, lads!" Rawlins yelled in congratulation. "Now reload with double grape, and we'll really give it to the big sods." They were getting close enough that grapeshot would do more damage than ball. Crewmen jumped to swab and worm out each gun, cartridges and two pyramids of grapeshot were rammed home, the firelocks were cocked and primed, and the guns hauled back up to the gunwales. Yet something else was going on—right in the middle of a battle, most of the gun crews had wide smirks on their faces. Rawlins gave Wyckham a questioning look, but the reason was obvious.

"Pierce, old boy," Wyckham commented with his own grin. "Is that the latest style for a Royal Navy officer?" Because Rawlins's close call with the flying stone had left his hat upside down, stuck on the ribbon tying his hair back. "You look like a macaroni who's had a long night of it."

Rawlins raised an inquisitive eyebrow with no idea what his captain was talking about. Finally, giving up, he turned back to the task at hand. "Gunners, pick your targets! Fire as your guns bear!" Individual guns crashed out as gun captains picked off running Draesh or blew away entire structures they were hiding behind. The bombardment of stones from ashore ceased. Gun crews continued at their work, though they continued shaking their heads and grinning over Rawlins's comic appearance. The big guns continued to pound the landing area, making the commercial district along the quays a continual storm of bouncing grapeshot, flying dust, and tumbling sheet metal.

Wyckham looked behind to see *Leviathan* about a half mile off, as expected, making slower progress than the speedy frigate. He turned back to prepare the ship for running up to the last dock; he needed to slow the ship down. "Mister Clifton," he called out to his second lieutenant forward on the foc's'le. "Let fly mainsails!" Crewmen released the mainsheets, the freed sails flapped and banged in the following breeze, and the ship slowed as it approached the far dock. "Ready kedg anchor!" Wyckham yelled to the crewmen near him on the rear anchor chains. "Let go!" The anchor splashed into the water astern, almost immediately hitting the bottom. With the soft sand in the cove, it didn't bite but dragged along the bottom, rapidly slowing the ship. "Helm two degrees port!" Wyckham wanted to drag the port side along the berth to slow down before the ship hit the main dock head-on.

"*Righteous*, grab hold!" Crewmen and marines looped their arms through ratlines and stays in preparation for the imminent crash. Fortunately, it wasn't too bad—the kedg anchor had the ship slowed to a crawl, and by the time it hit, her speed was around two knots. That was fortunate, because Wyckham had forgotten to grab anything for himself. When the cutwater crashed into the dock, he went flying down the quarterdeck stairs, only saving himself from a serious fall by running along the main deck as he landed. But after a few comical leaps trying to stay upright, he bumped into a gun and sprawled over it with a grunt.

“By gar, lookee thar,” yelled some old salt in the crew. “Cap’m canna’ wait to git ’n th’ fight!” That got a laugh from everyone as they began to disembark, leaping over the port gunnels to land on the pier, and within a minute, most of the force was ashore.

McConnell called out, “Third Company, forward, double time!” and his forty men quick-marched toward the cave entrance with Wyckham and the sailors right behind.

But before they had gone a hundred yards, all hell broke loose. The air was suddenly filled with the roared squeals of hundreds of Draesh, and a city-wide barrage of flying missiles that dwarfed the previous attack darkened the air. Not only was the enemy throwing jagged stonework, but also vendors’ carts, felled trees, and even entire small buildings. Groups of Draesh must be heaving the bigger objects together. They probably couldn’t see any targets but kept throwing so much material that the docks were steadily being blanketed. It was as if the whole city were falling upon them, and a dozen of McConnell’s men were already down, crushed under all sorts of debris. And worst of all, Wyckham could think of no defense or counterattack. The foes had retreated deeper into the warehouse district, completely out of sight, able to throw their deadly rain out of sight of *Righteous*’s guns. The attack on the cave faltered as the marines broke formation and frantically looked for cover.

Wyckham tried to dash back aboard *Righteous* to see if he could get sight of the foe from her tops, but he quickly gave up that idea when a heavy mining cart crashed to the ground right in front of him. He returned to safety in the lee of the city walls, occasionally sticking his head up between the projectiles to look around. When he looked up a third time, he spotted Wulfe’s small shuttlecraft flying above the embattled commercial district. What was he up to with his little unarmed ship?

Well, he was certainly going to try something, because there he was, walking out on the craft’s triangular wing, his ship’s helm apparently capable of flying the ship on its own. He was struggling with something heavy in his arms while he kept his gaze searching below. And through all this, he was smoking one of those cigarros that the vine people sold!

Suddenly he saw something, then raised his burden toward his mouth. It was a mortar shell, which he lit from the cigarro in his mouth and dropped it over the side. He then jumped back through the ship’s open door as the powerful shell exploded just above the ground, bouncing his little ship around in the air. But the tremendous blast did more to the Draesh on the ground, as entire blocks they were hiding in were leveled. Several of their shattered bodies went spinning away so far they landed on distant rooftops. Wulfe immediately emerged again, lit a second bomb, and dropped it, and the whole city shook with its detonation. His craft turned back to fly over the same area again, and on this pass, Wulfe dropped three more bombs off the wing in rapid succession. The thirteen inch shells packed with the new explosive sent shock waves throughout the wide area around the docks which had been the source of all the flying objects. Finally the ship changed course and headed over to land near the docks.

The hail of thrown projectiles dropped to a trickle. As the smoke cleared from the five massive explosions, Wyckham saw that most of the commercial zone was completely flattened. Wulfe had blown half the town away and the hidden Draesh with it. The attack could resume!

He looked around for the marine captain. “Captain McConnell,” he called out, “Back to the attack!” But his order was unnecessary. McConnell was already running along the wall, forming up his company to head for the cave. Rawlins was also reforming the scattered sailors to again follow the marines. “*Righteous*, to me! No excuse for loolygagging about, the air is clear thanks to our lupine friend!” And there was Wulfe, walking up to him and still puffing away on his cigarro. Once again he had saved the day with another last-second attack from the air.

“Get your buttocks moving, Wyckham.” The wolfman spoke through his translator device. “No more excuses—fine weather for an attack. Look at that sky. Clear as a bell.”

“I must say it now is,” responded Wyckham. “Thank God that nasty rain stopped.”

“Yes, well, your god had nothing to do with it, did he? You can thank your Captain Randolph and his mortar shells. He quickly loaded my

ship with a dozen so I could zip over here and save you sorry humans. Now here I am, ready for more fun. Could I beg the use of a pistol for a bit? I would really enjoy shooting a big pig with one of those new fireballs of yours. Every time I've killed a Draesh up to now, he died too quickly. I'd appreciate the pleasure of watching one of them die slowly from a painful fireball."

So the wolf warrior wanted to join the attack on the cave. Wyckham couldn't think of anyone better suited for a desperate fight in a crowded space. He had Bosun Greaves get the wolfman a string of sea-pattern pistols loaded with fireballs, and together they walked to the head of the massed sailors to meet up with Cochrane and the other officers. McConnell's marine company was already quick marching across the field toward the cave.

The dockside promenade ran straight for a hundred yards, then it turned toward the Commerce Gate which Harrison had wisely jammed open when he retreated into the palace. Wyckham and his shore party came through it to view an open field with the transporter cave entrance on the far side. The hundreds of sailors jogged through the area quickly; the only Draesh they saw were the corpses left from *Righteous's* great guns. The sailors rounded the last curve, and the cave entrance came into view across the field, with the marines almost to its mouth. When the marine company was about fifty yards away, it split to take positions along each side of the entrance. Sergeants lit grenadoes and threw them into the cave, then ran back to safety. Packed with the black ooze, the resulting explosions were like big howitzer shells instead of little hand-thrown grenadoes. Fire belched out from the cave opening and the ground shook, even back where Wyckham was walking. Two of the giant demons and a few Krag blew out as well, somersaulting through the air to land in mangled heaps. The marine company reformed and marched into the dark maw of the cavern, many holding lit whale oil lamps.

A minute passed, and then the cavern's mouth flashed with the explosions of grenadoes and a volley of musketry, followed by the fearsome roaring of many Draesh. A minute later, marines began to straggle out, some with minor wounds, others staggering or carrying even more seriously wounded. Soon it turned into a rout, with men running

pell-mell out of the cave. Wyckham spotted a seemingly whole Captain McConnell rallying some men and setting up a perimeter around the cave's mouth. Two big Draesh came roaring out, only to be peppered with flaming musket balls from the marines. One dropped like a stone with a smoking hole in its chest; the other squealed in pain and ran back into the cave.

But the marines' attack had failed, and they were out of the fight for now. Wyckham and his sailors would have to give it a try, but first he needed to get some idea what they would face.

"Captain, quick, what happened in there?" he asked as he ran up. "Tell me the lay of the land."

The young Scotsman was breathing heavily, clearly drained in body and spirit. "They set up an ambush position about halfway in where the cave opens up. We recognized the danger and threw grenadoes, but they were waiting too far back around corners and in holes to get hurt. A few of them demonstrated across the room to get us to fire a volley, ducked back into their holes, then emerged, pelted us with an overwhelming shower of missiles, and attacked hand to hand. Damned bastards were just too fast for us in close. It was a bloody rough go. Must have left a dozen men in there, God help them."

Attacking into a cave had proven a hard task for the marines. A company of real skirmishers, soldiers who stayed low and could advance over irregular ground, was what the situation called for. But all Wyckham had left were sailors. Hopefully the training Harrison had given them would suffice. They were all looking at him now, awaiting orders. They would make an assault on hell if Wyckham asked. And that was what Wyckham was about to do.

"All right, lads, it's up to us now," Wyckham bellowed. "Remember when we boarded *Hermione*?" That was a fight *Righteous* had been in a year ago. "We had to rush past her crew to get below and free all the imprisoned British sailors so they could join the fight? We have to move with the same sort of speed here. When we first enter the cave, fan out along the sides and look for a big demon to shoot. There's no time to waste! Just run and shoot, get to the portal room, and shoot every bugger in there. We can't let them turn the transporter on. Those of you

with pikes or swords, watch for crabmen. I'm sure we'll find plenty of them in there with their old Draesh friends. Keep those crabmen away from the shooters. Everyone with grenadoes, stick two- to three-minute fuses in some and light them now; you won't be able to once we're on the run. And make sure you throw the damned things before they explode! Captain McConnell, form a squad as soon as you can and follow us in. Keep the sodding pigs off our backsides. So—off we go! Remember—every man just run and shoot. Don't stop for anything!"

Answering with huzzahs and yelling "*Righteous!*" the agile sailors sprinted for the cave, most with cocked pistols in both hands. Wyckham took off with them, Cochran, Wulfe, and Obujimi right behind him, the four running near the middle of the pack.

The cheering faded as every sailor settled into a steady run, breathing in measured rhythms, the ground rumbling with the drumming of their bare feet. Cochran was breathing heavily, struggling with all his armaments, but he managed to stay alongside. Wulfe and Obujimi were loping along, keeping up without difficulty.

Wyckham himself had never been in such a wild charge. He found himself intensely focused on the cave opening ahead. Energy and fear rushed through his body, as it often did before a fight. The dark hole of the cave bounced in his vision and grew steadily as he approached, about to wrap around him in the fight of his life. Finally, sailors ahead of him entered, the cave walls flashed with pistol fire, and it began.

Ahead of them, illuminated by discarded lamps, was the spot where the cave widened and the marines had been ambushed. But instead of stopping to throw grenadoes or forming up in a line, the mass of sprinting seamen just went flying through the dangerous spot, blindly shooting and throwing grenadoes left and right. Hidden Draesh threw rocks from both sides, but the sailors were moving too fast, and most landed behind their targets. Just as in boarding a ship, groups of sailors fanned out along the sides of the big room to discover hiding places along the walls. With sudden roars, Draesh jumped from the rocks to attack with flying stones and slashing claws.

But there were too many pistols, and with the Greek fire, they were now deadly for the big demons. A steady tattoo of pistol fire kept dozens

of fireballs flying about, scouring both sides of the cavern with burning shot. When they struck one of the Draesh, they either burned apple-size holes right through them or settled inside the giant creatures to burn painfully. Three Draesh did manage to survive long enough to cause havoc among the sailors, sweeping their long arms back and forth to crush several men's bodies. But they were huge targets, and within moments, two went down in a hail of burning shots. The third went right for Wulfe, who stopped and ran backward while aiming at the pursuing monster. Just as it got close enough to strike the wolfman, he fired once and hit the beast right between the eyes, and it fell to land at his feet. Wyckham sensed that Wulfe had allowed the foe to get close before firing, just so he could look it in the eye as it died. The nimble alien then turned back to running forward without losing a step.

Suddenly one of the big ogres dropped from the ceiling right in front of Wyckham. It held a huge boulder with both arms behind its head, about to crush the captain. But both of his Nock rifled pistols were cocked and ready, and before the immense creature could move a muscle, Wyckham fired both and sent two balls of fire right through its chest and stomach. It squealed like a giant stuck pig and fell backward, clawing at the smoking holes in its body. On his right, a big Draesh turned and ran off after seeing what the humans' pistols could do. But Cochran stepped forward, slowly lowered his extended arm, and fired his first pistol. Despite its speed, Cochran had led the demon perfectly, and the huge creature crashed to the ground, a smoking hole in the back of its head. The Irish admiral could certainly shoot. Wyckham was certainly grateful to have the famous warrior admiral at his side in this fur ball.

Through all this, Wyckham hadn't missed a step; his run needed to stay steady. No stopping in this fight. He leaped between his fallen foe's trembling legs and continued his sprint toward the cave's control room. He and his men had to get to the transporter and stop it from bringing indescribable horror to his city. Ominously, he could make out buzzing noises above the sound of his men's pounding footsteps. The damned monsters had the machine turned on! There wasn't a second to lose.

Suddenly, men on each side screamed and went down. Crabmen were attacking! Krag still serving the Draesh were suddenly leaping out from behind boulders, grabbing sailors in their long claws, and dragging them back to where groups of the vicious crabmen could rip them apart with their powerful, short claws. Men fired pistols as they ran, but it was almost impossible to hit the agile crabmen as they jiggled about on their four feet. The attack came to a halt as the force broke apart into a general melee.

“Pikes and cutlasses, lads! Give ’em cold steel!” Wyckham yelled.

Men quickly obeyed and drew their cutlasses to hack away at the foes in their midst. “Pikemen to the front and make a lane! Points out and keep running!” Attacking like an ancient phalanx in Alexander’s army, the charging line of pikemen impaled the Krag in front of it and ran over them. The crowd of Krag had to step away or get run through, and the attack started to regain its lost momentum. Other pikemen fanned out on each side to keep the way open, swinging their long pikes back and forth to keep the crabmen at bay. Any foe left in the middle was cut down by men flying by with extended cutlasses. Severed claws and crab heads were spinning through the air. But it had slowed them down when they didn’t have a moment to lose.

“Keep running, *Righteous*! Put your blades out and keep moving as fast as you can! Not a moment to waste!” A group of large Krag popped out from the left and extended their long pointed claws at Wyckham. After firing his two Nock pistols, wounding two, he drew his Moroccan sword, and instinctively cut forward and down, severing another one’s claw. Then he extended his point to take another right in its chest. His momentum carried his blade right through the light shell of the crabman’s body, and it went limp. He twisted the sword to get the dead enemy off his blade, then resumed running without breaking stride. To his right, Cochrane cut with his heavy cavalry saber, beheading two more, also without losing his pace. Obujimi, on his left, ran a pike right through three of them, stacking them up on the shaft like skewered rabbits. He did have to stop and pull the weapon free of the wriggling crabmen, momentarily dropping out of the mass of dashing crewmen.

Now the cavern narrowed and took a sharp left turn. This was the entry passageway for the transporter room, about fifty yards long, a place where the Draesh would likely make a stand. Sure enough, as soon as men entered the turn, stones came flying down the new tunnel from a fair distance, keeping the intersection filled with flying boulders and rock shards. A few men tried to rush through, but they were crushed by the constantly flying stones. Only two of a dozen managed to stagger back around the corner. The thrown stones were hitting the intersection’s walls so hard that chips were shooting all over the place, like canister shot filled with musket balls. The mad rush came to a complete halt as sailors had to duck behind protective boulders along the walls.

Christ, they were beaten! They couldn’t even see the distant foes and for damned sure couldn’t shoot them. Grenadoes couldn’t reach them, they’d probably just bring the passageway’s low roof down on their own heads. Wyckham crouched low behind a large rock, furious at delaying while the big demons were surely activating the transporter.

“Men!” It was Cochrane, turning and running back down the entry tunnel. “Follow Admiral Cochrane! We’ll go get the last pig’s corpse! Drag it up here and use it as a movable fortification! Follow me lads, follow me!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, dozens of sailors took off after him, with Crawford in the front, all of them yelling “Cochrane! Cochrane!” They quickly disappeared back around the last turn they’d come through.

Within minutes, Wyckham heard a rowing cadence bouncing off the rock walls. Cochrane’s band appeared coming back around the tunnel’s bend, grunting out together as they jerked a dead Draesh along the ground. “Red, dee, heave, ho, red, dee, heave, ho...” It reminded Wyckham of a canal barge being poled along by its boatmen. Sailors were poling the corpse along by sticking their long pikes into the ground and prying the big body forward. Others had pushed their dirks into the beast as handholds to pull it along.

As they reached the deadly intersection, Cochrane yelled, “All right, lads, hold here a moment.” He ran to pick up his big volley gun,



then scampered back to the dead beast and took a position on the right side.

“Sailors with loaded firearms, to me! I need strong men, men who can push this beast along from the safe side! Once into the corner, we keep behind this carcass and shoot like hell down this next tunnel. Now!” With the creature lying on its back, volunteers immediately swarmed its left side and stabbed more dirks into it for handholds. “All right? Here we go! Red, dee, heave, ho!”

The sailors put their backs to it, and the beast again jerked ahead. After they had progressed ten feet into the tunnel juncture, stones from the enemy started to fill the air, but Cochrane’s group were all on the opposite side of the huge body from the enemy, and the stones thudded harmlessly into the immense cadaver. The men kept pushing until they had slid the giant Draesh body all the way across the entrance of the passageway and bottled it up. Stones continued to bounce harmlessly off the huge carcass as sailors stopped pushing and cocked the hammers back on their pistols and muskets. Crawford leaped up onto the giant’s head as the rest of the men worked their way into firing positions under the creature’s chin, arm, back, and any other spot they could poke a gun barrel through. Immediately a hail of shooting sent a shower of little flaming meteors streaking down the passageway. Cochrane himself took a prone position across the beast’s neck, aimed the powerful seven-barreled gun down the passageway, jammed the stock into the cadaver’s Adam’s apple, and pulled the trigger. The resounding crash of seven barrels sent dozens of fireballs down the small tunnel. Christ, Cochrane must have crammed three or four balls down each barrel!

The horde of fireballs flying straight down the tunnel struck home on some Draesh, and immediately the cave was filled with their agonized squealing. And apparently it put the fear of God into the rest, because the volume of flying missiles dropped to a trickle—it was their turn to seek cover. The clear air and squealing of the foes prompted the men to seize the opportunity to get moving again. Idle hands grabbed the dead Draesh by its toes and pulled it back from blocking the tunnel, and dozens of men ran around the corner, firing blindly to keep the portal entry tunnel filled with their deadly fireballs.

Just when Wyckham thought the tide had turned, what happened but the dead Draesh underneath Cochrane came back to life! Awakened by the volley gun’s recoiling right into its throat, it sat up, roaring and swinging its long arms through nearby sailors. Cochrane was rolled down onto the monster’s lap, and the furious demon cocked its arm to bash him against the walls. A moment before Cochrane’s days were ended, who but Crawford appeared, still hanging onto the Draesh’s head by its small, porcine ear. While swinging through the air, he managed to thrust a pistol into its left ear and fired, blowing fire and bloody gore right out of the creature’s other ear. The gunner jumped clear as the creature fell back in final repose. He gained his feet along with Cochrane, and they both started running and firing pistols down the passageway. Wyckham finally shook off his amazement at all he’d just witnessed and rejoined his charging men.

“That’s it, *Righteous*! Up and moving! Run and shoot! Don’t wait for a target! Just keep their heads down!”

The growing volume of pistol fire showed the men were listening; soon the cave was filled with a steady rattle like a drummer beating to quarters. More loud squeals confirmed that more shots had scored hits, but more importantly, the number of flying stones dropped to nothing as the big foes kept to ground. Wyckham was flying full speed, with Cochrane and dozens of the men alongside.

“A courageous act, admiral,” Wyckham commented between breaths as he ran. “But really, shouldn’t you have first asked that Draesh’s permission to be your personal firing step, don’t you think?”

“Well, I really needed something massive to back that volley gun up to, last time I shot that damned cannon it broke my shoulder,” the easy-breathing admiral replied as he ran. “And I certainly would have asked the fellow if I could make use of his Adam’s apple for a bit, except it would have been rude to disturb his nap.”

“But I must say I enjoyed shooting that thing,” he continued. “Ever since the Tories drummed up all those phony charges against me, I started picturing the vicious thieves in my mind as big pigs, each one different. That one looked just like Prime Minister Jenkinson himself, the pusillaminous bastard.”



Wyckham failed to see any resemblance of the dead monster to any human, much less to Prime Minister Jenkinson. But he had to marvel at Cochrane, this man every bit the hero that the British navy believed him to be. *Uumph*. Wyckham couldn't help but snort in his appreciation for the man's courage and jocular attitude in the middle of a desperate attack.

But he had to stay focused on the fight. There were several downed Draesh ahead of him, moaning and writhing on the tunnel floor. While still on a full run, Wyckham sheathed his sword and grabbed two more pistols on his string. He jumped up on the first monster's stomach, leaping off just as the wounded beast lunged for him. Pistols barked behind him, and that demon was no longer a threat. The next one already had half his head burned off—no concerns here—and Wyckham ran right up and over its motionless chest. However, the next one was very much alive. It had taken a very painful hit, as the smoke coming from its groin showed, and was raging and intent on revenge. Though it couldn't rise, it gave Wyckham a fearsome glare and swept its arm back to bash him into mush. The captain gathered himself and jumped over the swinging arm, firing two big navy sea pattern pistols right into the thing's monstrous head as he went flying by, causing the beast to promptly fall flat on the ground.

And then he was there, the entrance to the vast room carved out of the cliff for the transporter. The far wall was all lit up and buzzing with electrical devices, but Wyckham knew the transporter controls were around the corner to his left. That was where any remaining Draesh fighters would make their final stand, probably with an attack from concealment. But that kind of ruse wouldn't work on Wyckham. The Draesh were fools if they thought he would rush to the controls and run into a trap.

"Halt, lads, stop here! Light your grenades! Be sure to throw some sideways! Fill the whole damned room! And hold each one with both hands until you throw; we don't want to drop any here!" Loblolly boys, some as young as twelve, circulated though the assembled men with glowing slow match, lighting fuses. Wyckham held a grenade out to one, but the boy's hand was shaking so much he couldn't set it alight.

"Settle down now, son, settle down. Mister Kenworthy, is it? No cause for concern; we'll soon be done here. Just give me and the rest of the men a light, and Prize Bounty Wyckham will have you back aboard *Righteous* in time for tea."

That calmed the young boy down enough to get the grenade lit and move on to the next. All the hands cocked their arms and looked up at Wyckham one final time.

"So watch your fuses. Wait til they're down to an inch, don't give the bloody pigs time to throw them back. Then throw, wait for the explosions, and then run like hell and shoot the bejesus out of any machine along the far wall. Watch for attacks from the flanks and above as well, pigs can be hiding in the ceiling crevasses. All right? Throw when ready!"

Men watched their fuses burn down, and then the little bombs started to fly. The sizeable explosions hurt Wyckham's ears with their crashing echoes off the walls. Between the new explosions and the reverberations of the old, the sound increased until it was a steady roar, like an endless wave crashing continuously over a deck. Wyckham wanted to run and cover his ears, but he had to continue directing the fight. He cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted at the limit of his lungs into sailors' ears. "Harrow, throw left! Gray, yours over there! Pilcher, Jesus, get rid of that one quick!"

The din grew to a steady, body-shaking blast of sound, reaching a noise level none could tolerate. Wyckham and the rest of the crew bent over and clamped their hands over their ears.

Finally, the echoes started to die out. "At them, *Righteous*!" he yelled, jumping up and grabbing two fresh pistols from his string. He lunged into the room with the rest of the hands up and right on his heels.

Wyckham ran to the left with his eyes wide over his leveled pistols, quickly searching for the station's control area. Since their grenades used the new smokeless explosive, the air was clear. Wyckham could see Draesh spread over the floor, some still squealing and thrashing, others motionless. Then he saw them—three Draesh seated at the portal controls, frantically running their clawed hands left and right over

lit panels in front of them. Several others, standing around the panels, looked over at Wyckham and started for him with a blood-curdling roar. They were about a half cable away, far enough to have survived the grenades but still too far for his smoothbore navy pistols. But he could damned sure hit a wall. He quickly raised his right hand, drew a bead on a wall of red lights that the Draesh on the right was fussing with, and fired. He had the satisfaction of watching the flaming ball burn right through the creature's hand, continuing on to melt into the control wall in front of it.

The rest of the crew was right behind him and didn't need any orders to do the same as Wyckham. Dozens of men spread out and began firing off their own strings of pistols. Sailors shot theirs on the run; midshipmen and officers stopped and took careful aim. Sparks flew from the walls as scores of fireballs cut through the metal construction. With so many of the inaccurate pistols going off, the entire wall was covered in splattering flames, with plenty of rounds hitting the Draesh operators and dropping them squealing in pain to the floor. Wyckham found himself in a fighting rage, dropping spent pistols, grabbing new ones, yanking back hammers and firing, all the while yelling like a savage.

Once the Draesh charging them got close enough, they too were caught up in the hail of pistol fire and crumpled to the floor. One turned away and dropped onto four legs to run, but Cochrane drew a bead on it and fired a flaming pistol ball right between its shoulders. It burned through the beast's body and came out the top of its head, instantly dropping the fleeing demon to the floor with a crash. The complete chaos in the room grew to a violent crescendo, with the steady echoing of pistol fire, squealing enemy, exploding electrical devices, sailors yelling madly, and their captain screaming loudest of all.

Then, suddenly, the din stopped, every pistol discharged, the room filled with only fading echoes. Even the Draesh were quiet, every one of them dead, their limbs burned off, their heads and chests smoking. The walls of the station were a complete wreck. Not a single electric lamp was still lit.

They'd done it! This transporter wasn't going to bring in a fly, much less a Draesh fleet. But Wyckham knew the danger of relaxing after a seeming victory. This was the time to review the battlefield situation. The fight wasn't over. The city of Port Wyckham still had plenty of Draesh in it, and they must still be trying to storm the palace. If they took it with its guns intact, they could rain down artillery anywhere in the city—not to mention the depravations they would commit on Harrison's remaining men. Hopefully he could take a force out of the cave to link up with Badoin's men and flank the enemy. But *Righteous's* sailors were exhausted from the brutal running battle; they needed a respite before another fight. Most were bent over and panting, or seated on the floor swigging from leather canteens. They were played out, at least for a while.

But just then, Wyckham heard the sound of salvation: the marching feet of fresh men. It was McConnell's marines, regrouped and coming into the room at the rear of Wyckham's sailors, just as he'd asked. While down to around two dozen men, some of them wearing fresh bandages, they all had their big Brown Bess muskets, loaded with .70-caliber fireballs, and plenty of high-explosive grenades. Once they were out of the cavern and fighting house to house, just like in a seaborne raid, they would be a force to be reckoned with.

"Captain McConnell! You're a welcome sight. While I'm afraid you've missed the festivities here, there's a city to retake. Are you and your men recovered and up to the task?"

"Company...halt!" McConnell bellowed, and four columns of redcoats stamped to attention. The marine captain walked over to Wyckham and answered loudly for his company's benefit. "Aye, sir, Second Company ready for battle!" Then in a lower tone, he spoke in the captain's ear. "We're down to near half strength, but morale is good and they've got revenge on their minds. Any plan?"

"No, not really. Mayhap we should stroll back into town and see what kind of greeting our big friends give us. If Harrison still holds the palace, maybe we can direct him to bring down *Vesuvius's* mortars on their ugly heads." As he spoke, Wyckham was reloading his two Nock pistols.

“Aye, might as well just get the scrap started. I’d recommend we pick up your wounded on the way back. Our two Slick surgeons, along with some of their fellows who emerged from the city, are at the cave entrance patching up ours.” He barked orders, and his men did an about-face and headed out of the cave, picking up about a dozen wounded sailors as they went.

Wyckham left a group of sailors under Crawford to guard the transporter and then caught up with McConnell’s marines. They emerged right in the middle of a makeshift field hospital, with marines and sailors spread about as the Slicks worked their healing magic. Arseholes they may be, but God bless them, the Slicks could work wonders after a battle. A quick glance up at the palace revealed signal flags flying above the northeast tower. Did Harrison still hold the keep?

A marine sergeant ran up to McConnell, stamped his feet, and saluted. “Beg tah repaht, sah, pickets say no signs o’ foes. Signal f’um th’ palace, ‘enemy retreat inland.’”

Good God, was it really over? Wyckham couldn’t believe it. “Sergeant, can you tell me, what happened out there? Why did the enemy retreat? I’m sure they were all quite terrified that I was returning to the fight, but mayhap there was something even more frightening than I that persuaded them to flee the field?”

Wyckham’s light banter put the man at ease. “Aye, Captain. That Yankee up there war d’rectin’ mortar fire from *Vesuvius*, an’ when the buggers took cover, ’ee worked over their behinds with his own thirty-twos. We’ve not seen any pigs fer ten minutes ’r so.”

Wyckham still couldn’t believe the battle was over. Maybe the Draesh had actually taken the keep and were flying false signals? The damned things were certainly smart and fiendish for such a trick. Hell, they actually wouldn’t have had to learn a thing. Some of the Draesh present had surely consumed officers and midshipman with signaling knowledge in the Battle of Hollow Mountain, and it when one of the bastards knew something, they all seemed to know it.

Just then a huge explosion shook the western end of the city, followed by the distant squealing of wounded Draesh. Another of *Vesuvius*’s new mortar shells, apparently directed by Harrison in the

palace, had landed over the Draesh fleeing the city. So Harrison was definitely still up there, and he was helping the Draesh out of town to boot. Now white-clad French marines began emerging from the city’s edge across the field, chasing a few Krag. *Leviathan*’s marines had landed and successfully advanced towards the palace from the east, and they were now mopping up enemy crabmen that had been left in the city by their Draesh masters. Wyckham searched his mind for threats that might still exist but couldn’t find any. *Jesus, maybe it’s really over?*

The bell in the town’s small Anglican church began to ring, as it did on Sundays and holidays. The city’s residents started emerging from wrecked buildings and other hiding places, filling the streets with the port’s varied alien life. As Wyckham’s party progressed through the streets toward the palace, they were greeted by the cacophony of aliens cheering in their diverse ways. Friendly Krag bubbled and clicked, ants vibrated their antennae, gorillas roared and beat their chests, and of course the mudmen were applauding in their fart-like language. After Wyckham’s party passed, they filled the streets and followed it up to the palace, still excited and celebrating, each in its own way. Wolfmen were drinking, stickmen were singing in their flutelike voices, the blind apemen were groping for one another and then brutally slapping one another’s chests. With the Draesh gone, the glowing balls of Fireflies left the ships and floated over to join the celebration, emitting a singsong humming through the air. The first one landed next to Wyckham and immediately became Lady Brashton, taking his arm and walking alongside him.

The palace gates were opened by some excited ants, and Wyckham quickly made his way up to the ramparts, though it took almost all his remaining strength to do so. Upon gaining the ramparts, he instructed McConnell to allow his men to stand down—their fight was finally over. Marines stacked their muskets, removed their shakoes, and sat wherever they could, gratefully accepting water brought up by the city’s varied alien residents. Around the almost-completed breach sat a group of Harrison’s Yankees, along with more ants and some of the blind gorillas. In their center was a powder-blackened Harrison, stretched

out over a pile of rubble, looking completely exhausted as well. Aliens from the town were already handing him and his men all sorts of food, which they gratefully accepted—God knew what they’d had to eat for the last few days. Most importantly, several Slick surgeons appeared and went to work on Harrison’s wounded.

“Captain Harrison!” Wyckham greeted him warmly as he sat down on a still-warm gun next to the Yankee privateer. “Joy of the day! A victory thanks to your sterling defense here. Makes Vienna’s stand against the Turk look like a garden party!”

“About time you decided to join the ball,” Harrison said as he managed to slowly stand, stiff and sore after many hours working the big guns. “Glad you ended your ‘claret cruise’ just in the nick of time. Damned pigs attacked right after you left, had the breach just about practicable when you arrived. Never thought I’d be so happy to see a British fleet on the horizon. And I must say your Captain Randolph’s gunnery was true. I guess with the new explosive charge, even Englishmen can hit something for a change. Jesus, but those shells were powerful! Each one he fired took out a whole city block and every pig in it. After a few of those things going off, the big swine besieging me decided that they had better things to do elsewhere. But I imagine the fight here pales compared to what you just went through, fighting your way into the cave and shutting down the portals. Last one’s closing now.” With that, Harrison gestured into the air behind Wyckham.

The captain turned to see a line of three floating portals behind him, high in the air, all with their sides closing in. On his way up here, he hadn’t even noticed them, exhausted as he was on his way to the palace. Hell, the damned Draesh had gotten some portals open after all! As he watched, the door on the left closed completely and disappeared, leaving only two still open and those closing quickly.

Then, just as the next portal was about to disappear, the one thing Wyckham had tried to stop happened right in front of him. Something flashed through the last portal, barely clearing the shrinking opening, and flew by the city at an incredible speed, shaking the ground with a blast of sound. It slowed down about a mile to the south and turned in the air, returning slowly to the city and descending right toward the palace.

Wyckham had seen this type of flying ship before, in a vast storage chamber inside Hollow Mountain. It was a Draesh patrol craft, about a hundred feet long, small by their standards, but equipped with those deadly beam weapons that could slice through anything. As he spoke, a door opened on the ship’s hull, and what was clearly a weapon emerged and locked into place.

*Christ, we’re all done for. What a fool I’ve been!* He had simply assumed the portals had never opened, since the Draesh in the cave were shot while still working the controls. He’d never even glanced upward when he came out into the open! So all the day’s fighting was for naught. This one ship, though it was only a scout craft with a small crew, had weapons that could obliterate his entire military force. Since Port Wyckham had no weapon that could shoot down a flying ship, it could conquer the whole planet even without the arrival of any additional ships. But surely that would be happening soon as well; once the crew of this ship destroyed the city, it would repair the transporter and bring in a sizeable Draesh fleet.

Wyckham momentarily reached for a pistol from his string, then stopped—the range was too long. But the marines had loaded muskets, and the single ship was descending quite close to them, probably oblivious to the fact that British muskets with Greek fireballs were now so deadly. Maybe McConnell’s men could hole that ship in its controls or propulsion device, drop the damn thing like a duck. But they had to shoot first!

“Captain McConnell! Fire on that craft! Now! Shoot, lads, shoot it!”

Marines and sailors got up and lunged for their muskets, exhausted as they were. They were too late. A bright-yellow beam about a yard wide emerged from the device protruding from the ship’s belly, hitting the wall below them. Rocks exploded and flew all about; then, with a roar, the entire wall fell away, and Wyckham was in free fall. Fortunately, he stopped almost immediately as he landed in the breach on a pile of dislodged stones. Others near him were not so lucky and fell spinning from the high walls to their deaths.

The beam continued to walk back along the ramparts, exploding munitions, destroying stonework, and incinerating men and aliens

alike who had gathered on the palace ramparts. The powerful beam traversed right across McConnell's men, slicing them in half so cleanly that some of their legs were left standing in the rubble. It continued into the palace's southwest tower, exploding its thick stone wall and cutting right through. With a steadily growing rumble, the tower collapsed down upon itself, sending stones and dust flying everywhere.

Wyckham covered his head with his arms and dug behind the edge of the broken wall next to him, as debris rained down for what seemed like minutes but was only a few horrible seconds. Finally, the crashing of flying stones died down, and the captain forced himself to stick his head up, though he dreaded what he would see.

The entire north side of his governor's palace was a ragged ridge of broken stonework. Both human and alien body parts, neatly severed by the deadly beam, were protruding from the heaps of rubble at all sorts of odd angles. Immediately, the moans and screams of wounded men started to fill Wyckham's ears, along with the undefinable sounds of wounded aliens. But there were no surviving Slick surgeons to help them. The scene was one of utter devastation.

As the dust settled further, Wyckham made out the Draesh ship, floating some ten feet in the air over the leveled north rampart. The ship's two beam weapons, with their thick barrels and glass muzzles, were still aimed at the destroyed wall. One of the filthy bastard Draesh was descending from the ship's mechanical stairway, holding what was clearly a small beam weapon and looking about with a sneering smile on its foul mouth. The damned thing had a green cloth around its head, the sign of Draesh nobility. Just wonderful. This angry monster was probably related to the Draesh ruler that Wyckham had personally slain at Hollow Mountain, and he would certainly give Wyckham the most agonizing of deaths.

Several glowing balls of light were drawn back and lined up in front of the ship like obedient children, Fireflies apparently under the control of this evil monster. Wyckham didn't know much about what Draesh could do to Fireflies, but the energy beings were in constant fear of getting anywhere near a Draesh. Lady Brashton had mentioned some kind of mental torture that the big pigs could execute on them if

in close proximity. He noticed some of the balls were flickering—were they being tortured now? An image of his Lady Brashton Firefly in terrible pain flashed through Wyckham's thoughts. He had to help her.

Wyckham stood up and was immediately spotted by the big demon, who smiled a sinister grin. "Well, if it isn't the Captain Wyckham himself! Or should I say the Governor Wyckham, since I hear you've proclaimed yourself master of our world? Actually, hold off on your answer a moment; I must attend to your friends over here." With that, the creature aimed his weapon to Wyckham's left and fired. A small beam swept the rubble along the destroyed parapet, cutting two marines in half just as they rose from the rubble and tried to raise their muskets. Their severed torsos splattered blood as they hit the ground with dull thuds. One of them was McConnell's. The Draesh chuckled as he watched them fall—the demon was clearly having a delightful time.

His stalwart marine captain was dead, sliced in two like a butchered cow. God, how Wyckham loathed these filthy, arrogant ogres. Not only did they want to devour every other being in the cosmos, they loved causing pain while they did it. And to hear them speak the King's English was particularly enraging, knowing they had acquired that ability by consuming British sailors. He hoped that any surviving humans or aliens would stay down. This bastard Draesh would shoot anyone it saw just for entertainment.

To his left, he heard some rubble running down a section of the destroyed wall. Though it was probably just the broken stonework settling, Wyckham watched hopefully to see if any buried men or aliens were digging themselves out. But he saw nothing, just the heaps of broken stonework and the half-buried guns that had been blown off their carriages.

Then he saw it, about twenty paces away, some stones trickling downward next to the muzzle of a dismounted thirty-two pounder jutting out from under a collapsed wall. The gun was jerking upward and sideways! It stopped momentarily as two twirling ant antennae popped up. Harrison had been using ants in his gun crews, and apparently some were burrowing around in the destroyed stoneworks. Sure enough, an ant's head followed the antennae out of the debris, and



it was none other than Queen's Favourite! The large insect looked around just enough to spot the hovering spacecraft, burrowed back into the rubble, and the gun muzzle jerked one more time towards the enemy spacecraft. Then, of all things, up from the dust in front of the gun rose Admiral Cochrane, standing there looking unthreatening, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Amazing weapon you have there. Must say I'm very impressed. But allow me to introduce myself. I am Admiral of the Red Sir Thomas Cochrane, Lord of Dundonald. I am just an observer and not in command here. Captain Wyckham over there is in command. It is with him you should discuss terms."

Cochrane was standing a foot in front of the big gun's muzzle, covering it from the Draesh's view. From the side, Wyckham saw that he was holding two cartridge pouches behind his back. The captain immediately realized that Cochrane wanted him to distract the monster so he could load the gun unobserved.

The immense beast was still aiming his weapon at Britain's revered admiral. "One of your admirals?" the monster said. Then he looked back at Wyckham and lowered his weapon. "Isn't that interesting! You brought him all the way from your little Earth? Thought a visit to the Draesh homeworld would be a nice little holiday for your commander, did you, governor? You figured all the planet's original rulers had been killed or run off into the interior? So your admiral here could just drop in for some sailing, do a little sightseeing, without a care? He'd be so impressed that he'd send you a big fleet to patrol the planet, all yours to command? Well, coming here was his last mistake. Once I go let the rest of our navy in, we'll all have lots of fun with the both of you. Those are your *terms*."

Throughout the demon's harangue, Wyckham was watching Cochrane's hands search behind him for the gun's muzzle, then tip several cartridge pouches into it, dropping paper-wrapped fireballs down the barrel. With his twelve pistols and the big volley gun, Cochrane had gone into battle with a lot of ammunition, and he was dumping it all into this gun. This was one big load of fireballs. Could it work? If they could hit the hovering ship with a load of the molten metal balls, some

of them would surely burn through critical components that were keeping the ship aloft. And with the cannon nearly upright, there was no need for a rammer. Cochrane just dribbled the cartridges slowly into the muzzle so they didn't jam up, dropping them down into the breach. With a final shove under the rubble, the burrowing ants adjusted the gun's attitude, Cochrane finished the loading, and all was set for the daring attack. The rustle of stones around the gun caused the giant foe to look back toward Cochrane, searching for the cause of the sound.

Wyckham had noticed one of his Nock pistols half buried in the rubble in front of him. Better get set for whatever was coming. With the beast looking away, he quickly picked it up and thrust it behind his back. Now he needed to distract the monster one more time so Cochrane could make his move.

"Yes, just think of how much fun you'll have devouring him alive, piece by piece," he spoke out clearly. "But it might be better to save him for the victory ball that I'm sure your race will throw, celebrating your heroic actions. For capturing an admiral, I imagine your superiors would shower you with rewards for providing such a combination of fine dining and entertainment. And how delicious he'll be, since you'll all be quite peckish after a day of slaying half the population of the city."

That actually got the fiend to start slobbering in anticipation of feasting on an important human, and he shifted his gaze back at Wyckham.

"So, you've guessed the ceremonies we stage after we conquer another inferior race. Yes, the 'admiral' will be quite an attraction at tonight's dinner party. But make no mistake, the Captain Wyckham, you will be at the center of our attention. Ever since your ridiculous fleet forced our expulsion from this, the home world that we've occupied for millennia, every member of our race has been dreaming of the day we consume you. You will thoroughly love it—the haughty British tribe of humans loves to be served, I understand?" With that, the huge monster tipped its head back, closed its eyes, and laughed wildly at its word play in the ridiculous language of the humans.



That gave Cochrane his chance. He spun back to the gun's breach as six ants jumped up from cover and lifted the gun to bear on the hovering ship. One of the ants pulled the lanyard, but the firelock was too mangled to fire. Cochrane, ahead of things as always, had already pulled a pistol from his string. He aimed it down the touchhole and pulled the trigger. The flaming ball set off the gun better than any priming powder, and it fired with a thunderous crash, spewing out a load of brilliant white fireballs as it recoiled violently out of the cradling ants' arms. Brightly burning rounds shot across Wyckham's gaze, leaving smoke trails that ended in dozens of blackened holes along the ship's side. The ship immediately spun and fell, crashing into the dry moat outside the wall where it exploded in flames and sent parts flying in all directions.

That certainly stirred the eloquent Draesh from its revelry. With a furious scowl replacing his previous grin, the enraged monster started to lift his weapon to fire on Cochrane. It was Wyckham's turn to act. He turned his body sideways for a right-handed pistol shot, thrusting his right arm straight up, then steadily lowering it to place the muzzle over the foe's chest.

Like most young gentlemen who grew up in the English countryside, Wyckham had practiced pistol dueling. It paid to have that skill, since you never knew which squire's son would be the next to get drunk at some affair, take offence over some nonsense or other, and issue a challenge. While he'd never been in a duel, at age twelve Wyckham had started sneaking off with a brace of his father's pistols to practice shooting in the woods, and he'd become a quick and accurate shot. Now his life depended on it. While the hundred-foot distance was long for a pistol shot, the creature's immense size made it an easier target.

But the damned Draesh's bulging eyes caught his arm movement, recognized the immediate threat, spun towards Wyckham and fired its weapon. The deadly beam hit the wall to his left, exploding stones into the air which flew into him and spoiled his aim. The burning maelstrom moved closer as the beast walked the burning light over toward him.

Exhausted from the day's fighting and his concentration affected by the approaching beam, Wyckham was having trouble drawing a

bead on the monster. He needed to put the pistol's notched sight right on the creature's chest and hold it long enough to fire, but a constant tremor had invaded his hand. *Damn it, man, steady up!* One second passed that seemed like a lifetime. But for the sake of every living being in the cosmos, he couldn't rush this shot, and he kept trying to put the wandering pistol sight over the center of the creature's body.

Larger rubble flying from the approaching beam started to hit him. *You've got to shoot now, Wyckham!* But his pistol's sight was still making small circles in the air. Even as he pulled the trigger and fired, he knew the shot was going high. He sprang to his right, trying to leap away from the burning beam as it followed him. Suddenly, just as it was about to reach him, it turned off. As Wyckham landed, he saw the monster's head back snap back, and the beam weapon dropped to the ground.

While missing the creature's chest, Wyckham had instead hit it dead center in the forehead! In the split-second passage of the fireball through its head, its brains were brought to an immediate boil and exploded out of its ears, nose, and mouth. The giant creature dropped like a heart-shot elephant, dead as the proverbial doornail, the ground shaking as the thirty-foot beast fell and bounced to rest motionless in the dust.

*Christ, now is this fight finally over?* He looked over to see if Cochrane had survived, and there he was, nodding at Wyckham as he lowered his own pistol and uncocked it.

"One helluva shot there, young man," the admiral stated bluntly.

"Had to kill the bugger instantly. Can't stand the squealing they make when they're wounded," Wyckham responded.

A quick scan of the air above the city showed no more ships. Thank God only the one had gotten through before the portal closed. Wyckham dropped to the ground to sit on a pile of stones, totally exhausted in body, brain, and spirit. But he saw to his relief that the Fireflies who had been under the monster's sway were now bright with renewed light. They transformed themselves into human female form and immediately started organizing help for the wounded.

Around the buried gun, several ants climbed out from under the scattered stones, one of them Mr. Queen's Favourite, who acknowledged

Wyckham with a silent nod. *That ant is all business*, Wyckham thought as he nodded back. Other humans and aliens were extricating themselves from the rubble, some apparently whole, others needing attention. Human moans and all sorts of strange cries from the more seriously wounded reminded Wyckham that his responsibilities were far from filled. Soon he was directing arriving ants, gorillas, and any other sturdy alien types that were emerging from the city, getting them to pry up stones and free trapped men and aliens covered by debris. Some Fireflies directed arriving Slick surgeons to set up a field hospital right there in the open, and soon the faceless creatures were mending torn flesh with their remarkable electrical devices. Badoin's French crewmen were coming up on the wall to render additional assistance, and four of them brought Harrison by on a stretcher, headed down to the city's hospital. Thankfully, he was alert and up on his elbows, apparently not too badly off.

Seeing Wyckham, he confirmed that diagnosis when he spoke up. "Well, your lordship saves the day again." He looked down at the dead giant with an apple-size hole in its head still smoking. "One helluva lucky shot, no doubt about that. Don't ever expect me to believe you were aiming at the bastard's head."

Wyckham smiled at the man's constant disparagement. "I don't know why, but I'm glad to see you survive. Too bad one of those hot beams didn't melt your mouth closed before I settled him. But actually, how do you fare?"

"I'll be fine, thank you Captain. Just a broken leg, hit by a stone. Slicks'll probably stick a tree branch in there, and I'll be up and about in no time. Certainly can't be lounging around the hospital. God knows you won't be able to rebuild this town without me," he quipped as he was carried off.

Finally, the relief effort was properly underway, and Wyckham could sit down and take stock of the battle's aftermath. Cochrane strolled over, seemingly still full of energy, but condescended to sit down at the exhausted captain's invitation. Recognizing battle fatigue, Cochrane gently put a hand to his shoulder. "That was one hell of a fight, sir, one *hell* of a fight. You should sit here and rest a bit."

Wyckham just looked at the man for a moment and shook his head in amazement and appreciation. He'd gone through everything Wyckham had but looked ready to do it all again. But he had to ask about something.

"So just how did you work out that action with the ants? I don't see any translators on their heads, damaged in the fight I'll warrant. Have you already learned to speak Antish?"

"Didn't have to talk," he stated matter-of-factly as he stared out over the port while removing the string of pistols from his neck. "They don't like talking anyway. When that bloody pig fired his gun, I was knocked down and covered by some stonework, right next to the ants. Without a moment's hesitation, those ants started shoving a buried gun upward. I immediately stood up to hide their activity, then realized I should add some Greek fire to the gun's load, waved my fire cartridges at them behind my back. They're no fools, picked up on the plan right quick, waited for me to load the gun. We all jumped once you got the big ogre blathering."

He looked back at the ants, now working to free buried compatriots, shaking his head in appreciation. "They'd make damned fine sailors. Wouldn't mind having a few aboard my next ship."

Wyckham turned his attention to the city below. Much work lay ahead. The eastern section along the docks was heavily damaged, mostly from *Vesuvius's* mortars. Smoke wafted skyward from smoldering fires, but the city's buildings were mostly metal, so a major conflagration was not a concern. The collapsed gate bastion had to be addressed immediately, they would have to build a second barrier inside the main city gate to keep any marauding Draesh out. Fireflies would have to quickly restore portal operations so trade could resume—this city would need all sorts of materials to repair itself.

But he was encouraged as he saw some aliens already working on clearing streets and moving rubble into heaps. Unlike back home, things happened quickly around here. There were no city commissions, alderman, guilds, or powerful aristocrats to hold matters up while they looked for ways to line their own pockets from any calamity. The city would be rebuilt before he knew it.

Now another group came up the one remaining stairway to stand on the rampart and look about the city. It was the bunch of visiting British nobles from *Scamp*, getting a look at the city for the first time. Baron Kemp, still using a cane, was in animated conversation with Wyckham's father. Along with them was the whole gaggle; the banker Lloyd, Allan from the East India Company, and Smithson from the London Shipper's Guild. Though they were fifty feet off, Wyckham could make out snippets of their conversation.

"The East India Company simply must have this palace"... "Yes, the Crown's tollhouse should definitely go there by the docks"... "Close down all the brothels"... "Get all the damned foreign creatures out of the city, for God's sake"... "A stone warehouse there for holding gold ingots heading back to London"...

*They think the fight for control of this city still isn't over?* Well, Wyckham was done fighting. He'd won the place, not them. This gaggle of snobs had no claim, nor did the crown they represented.



13

## COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Wyckham couldn't believe it. Since the battle for the city a month ago, things had been going so smoothly. But with today's events, it seemed the entire battle had been for naught. *Christ, had all my ducks in a row, and now this!*

His governor's palace had been rebuilt with thicker dirt-filled walls and more gun emplacements. The city walls were getting completely redone—still seventy feet high, but also twenty feet thick with an earth center, and with four corner bastions in a modern star shape. In addition, there would be four large triangular ravellins, V-shaped tenailles to cover the postern gates, and a covered way to protect defenders as they moved about. Already, twenty-four thirty-two-pounders and six eighteens salvaged from the sunken French ships in the harbour had been mounted along the walls, and the ants had completed several of the new clay guns with their incredible range. The city was already one very difficult prospect for a siege, and soon it would be an impossible one. Goddamned Draesh could throw stones at the walls all they wanted to now; all they'd get for their efforts would be sore arms, and then flaming shot would turn their fat piggy arses into smoked hams.

And Wyckham had quickly settled all the colonizing and commercial problems posed by the visiting London dignitaries. At the end of the Second Battle of Port Wyckham, standing on the wrecked walls listening to the plotting of all the visiting British, he had decided to make it all a simple matter. Once the Fireflies had fixed the transporter, Wyckham had a quick ceremony to officially proclaim himself governor, then had his marines stuff all the Englishmen back aboard *Scamp*, making sure his own father and brother were specially accommodated in her brig, and sent the whole lot of thieves back to England. Thomas Peel was the only one Wyckham had permitted to stay for a while, having found him to be a stimulating intellect and a true reformer, dedicated to improving the lot of the common man.

Then just when he'd thought things were settled, Randolph had to go and bring calamity back to Draez. Wyckham was furious.

"Bloody hell, you were to drop them off in boats at the mouth of the Thames, not take them on a claret cruise all the way to the London docks!"

Commander Randolph, his head hanging, was trying to justify his actions. "Sir, the channel was up, a quarter gale. Those boats would have been packed to the gunnels; they'd never have made it. No respectable officer could have consigned these British peers to certain death, just dump them there and sail off."

"And of course you didn't dally in London at all?" asked a still-enraged Wyckham. "You didn't set foot in any taverns or a Cheapside brothel, by any chance? No, you certainly wouldn't have run the risk of being taken, just to go off tippling with the men or rogering some poxy two-penny whore, would you, Sir Respectable Officer?"

"Tweren't that, Captain," he replied sheepishly. "It was Mary Chapelle, Lord Chester's daughter. She lives in London; I'd called on her during previous trips. Now she's in love with me! Turns out I'm famous! We're all famous—all over England, they speak of us as heroes! We've been in all the papers, and everyone is talking about our victory here on the new world! And me, a simple commander, pursued by an earl's daughter! I just had to see her again. But her father found out, got me arrested by the night watch. Once they found out I was from *Scamp*, I was taken to Baron Kemp."

Wyckham stood up and spun in rage, his arms extended as if he were an MP pleading for votes in Commons. "Mayhap after that, you could have kept your gob shut instead of guiding this overwhelming fleet to my door? For God's sake, we'd have sent a ship back for you! Think we would just leave you there? Hell, the admiral here would've gone back, spread some gold around, gotten you sprung right quick. But instead, you bring this circus here?" He slammed his fist down on the table, knocking over all the decanters of French wine on it, prompting Cochrane to frantically lunge for his falling bottle.

Commander Hamilton, shamefaced, tried to justify his actions. "They brought me to Saint James, took me right into the Cockpit, for God's sake. Threw me in front of the Privy Council and King George himself! My father and grandfather were there too, furious. Said I'd disgraced the Hamilton family name, I was worse than a goddamned Jonathan, a colonizer revolting against the Crown, and so on. And Admiral Phillip was there with the entire Board of Admiralty! What was I supposed to say when he commanded me to guide these ships here? Tell him to bugger off and take the rest of the pissant board with him? Then when the king threatened to revoke the Hamilton family peerage and get the family banned from every London club, that really did it. My father said he'd kill me if I didn't guide the fleet here."

"Well, yah *shudda* told 'em all to go bugger 'emselves," commented Cochrane, thoroughly inebriated. "Phillip and the rest 'o Admiralty def'nitly *are* a buncha pissants." He added a belch for final punctuation.

So Cochrane would be of no help today. When Wyckham had arrived at the Ruptured Krag, he'd found the admiral already there, quite disheveled from a long night working his cups. Wyckham needed someone with political sway if there was to be any reasoning with the fleet's commanders. But Cochrane was useless on the one day Wyckham needed a savvy politician at his side.

Seated at his table in the Ruptured Krag along with Admiral Cochrane and Commander Hamilton were Lieutenant Rawlins, Captain Randolph, *Capitaine* Badoin, and Robert Peel. Wyckham gazed out the Ruptured Krag's bay windows at the newly arrived British warships in the harbour.

So thanks to *Scamp's* commander Hamilton needing a romantic interlude, the same rotting crowd he'd thrown out was back, this time with a formidable British fleet. Hamilton had been forced to lead them to the spot in the channel where the portal would open, and now here they were. Good Lord, but there were nine ships of the line moored in the cove, led by HMS *Victory*, one hundred guns, Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar. Also present were *Britannia*, one hundred; *Neptune* and *Temeraire*, both ninety-eights; and *Ajax*, *Mars*, *Swiftsure*, *Defiance*, and *Bellerophon*, all third-rate seventy-fours. Along with them were several frigates and brigs, and over a dozen troopships. The fleet was in the process of disembarking around two thousand troops—marines, infantry, and even cavalry. Their landing boats were methodically docking at the quays, quickly unloading their troops, and pushing off just as the next one arrived, all under the protection of the fleet's guns.

Even with the city's fortifications only half complete, Wyckham probably could have seriously contested their landing, especially now that he had the Greek fire. But firing on fellow Englishmen and starting a war with his own country was just something no decent officer could even consider, and certainly not him. Instead, he'd fled his palace one step ahead of the first marines who came ashore and made his way to the Krag, where his officers could usually be found at the end of the day. Now here he was, reduced to discussing plans in a tavern while Kemp and the rest of the scum were busy moving into his palace!

His steward, Obujimi, had rudely awakened him at dawn, shaking him roughly and yelling that he needed to get up and leave the palace without delay, that there was no time to even get properly dressed. Which for Obujimi meant matters were indeed serious. When he objected, Obujimi grabbed him by his robe's collar and thrust him to a window for his first shocking view of the British invasion fleet. "Let me assure you, sir," the former slave stated as Wyckham looked out over the harbour, "this is something I am very familiar with. It is called a lynch mob, and it's coming for you." One glance persuaded Wyckham to follow his man's advice and run. Sporadic musketry was already breaking out around the palace gate. It was definitely time to escape the palace, and Wyckham had the means to do it.

He pressed a stone on the wall of his bedroom, and a panel slid away to open the passage he had wisely built for an emergency just like this. Hell, even the pope had a secret passageway to escape to Castel San Angelo, why shouldn't he have something similar? Shouting to Obujimi to alert his officers not to fight but to meet him at the Ruptured Krag, he'd grabbed his uniform coat and run down the hidden stairs to emerge behind the palace. He made his way through back alleys to the tavern, still clad in his dressing gown.

Now he sat at the Ruptured Krag with no idea what to do. His officers were equally stymied. Christ, he'd lifted the Draesh siege of the city only to have it fall into the hands of the fools running his own country, who would now muck everything up! And he was in personal danger, since search parties were undoubtedly looking for him, and the Ruptured Krag would be the first place they'd look. Draeshpalone, the native prince, had rushed into the Krag earlier, trying to persuade everyone to ride off with him on some of the giant armoured bulls he had outside. But Wyckham refused to run away like a criminal and live in a jungle with diminutive savages. This was his city, goddammit!

Through the window, he saw the floating globes of several Fireflies over the docks, heading his way. There was a chance of help after all! The magical energy beings could work wonders in any crisis. But suddenly they dropped to the ground and disappeared, probably taking the form of some bugs or small animals. Hiding just when he needed them! With them out of the picture and his officer group offering no ideas, he had to face the fact that his world had been conquered by the same inbred, self-centered fops he thought he'd gotten rid of.

His prognosis was confirmed as the Krag's doors banged open and in came a squad of none other than the royal guards from Westminster Palace, replete with bearskin hats and bayoneted muskets. And cowering behind them, waiting for them to ensure the way was clear of any frightening aliens, was Baron Kemp and none other than his recurring nemesis, Admiral William Jarvis himself!

"There's the thieving rebel!" shouted Jarvis, now suddenly possessed of a clear mind, shouting and gesticulating at Wyckham. Had his mental breakdown been completely feigned? It certainly seemed



so. The bastard had put on a complete ruse of lunacy so he could surface once again and bring ruin to Wyckham!

The party shoved its way through the tavern, frightening away some small stickmen and one of the ivy-like plant beings that was nearby. Wyckham's seated officers rose and drew their swords. Three mudmen, posted as provosts to keep order in the Krag, noticed the building imbroglio and rolled over menacingly. But Wyckham didn't want any fighting on his behalf. He recognized the leading mudman as the one present at the gunpowder testing a month ago, a fellow whose name translated to Bubbler.

"Belay, I ask you, Bubbler, belay," he stated simply, then turned to his officers. "And you gentlemen as well. I'll be going with them peaceably. No cause for bloodshed among fellow servants of the king." Wyckham stood and started for the door.

"Aha! Servant of the king?" shouted Jarvis, so angry that spittle flew from his lips, as it was wont to do whenever he threw one of his temper tantrums. "Upstart demon, you mean! And what a gallant surrender! As if you had a choice?" Then Jarvis realized Wyckham was still dressed in his dressing gown. "Why, you're not even in uniform! You will be executed as a spy!"

How men like Jarvis could ever advance to the highest positions in the Royal Navy had always astonished Wyckham. "Ah, Admiral, once again your brilliant deductions amaze me. How did you realize I was a spy? You knew that spies like me frequently wear dressing gowns so we can quickly change into our many nefarious disguises?" Shaking his head and staring skyward, Wyckham stood and headed toward the door, but Jarvis stepped in front of him.

"Oh, not so fast, Wyckham! Sergeant, bind this miscreant's hands! And put a rope collar around this thieving deserter's neck! I'll walk him through the city to be recognized as the common criminal he is!"

Now Wyckham's dander was getting up.

Baron Kemp had to chime in, just like a bloody clock. "Bind his hands? Hell, shoot the impertinent scum right now! Servant of the king, he says? Good Lord, this man stole an entire colony from the Crown, using the Royal Navy to do it! This high-handed scum deserves

no trial or further considerations. You will shoot him right now, sergeant."

The sergeant, not sure that a baron had the right to order the execution of a British officer, hesitated and looked around, clearly puzzled as to his course of action. But Kemp faced no such indecision. Shaking his head in disgust with the lack of backbone among his military escort, he drew his sword, extended the point, and made a full lunge at Wyckham.

Kemp had known Wyckham when he was useless with a blade and probably thought the captain could be easily dispatched. He had no idea that Wyckham was now an accomplished swordsman, thanks to the many hours of bouting with Moore. With a snap reflexive move, Wyckham's left hand lifted his scabbard while his right drew the blade out halfway to make a long defensive barrier. As Kemp's point came in too wide, Wyckham stepped right to get away from the threat, at the same time gently pressing both scabbard and the *forte* of his blade against Kemp's point. Before Kemp felt the subtle pressure on his blade, his point had gone *passe*, hit the back of Wyckham's flexible chair with a loud screech, and was firmly stuck in the chair back.

With the parry, Wyckham finished pulling his blade out of the scabbard, his weapon arm straight up, his point down, just inches from Kemp's throat. But he stopped his *riposte* at the last moment, watching a terrified Kemp frantically trying to yank his blade free of the chair back. Much as Wyckham wanted to just finish his waiting *riposte* and have done with the man, he couldn't do it. Christ, the man was a member of the House of Lords, not to mention Tracy Brashton's husband. Though for all he knew, she wouldn't mind any action that freed her from this pompous dolt. From what he now knew about their marriage, she'd probably thank the man him who ran her husband through.

A wave of relaxed calmness washed over Wyckham. Because he'd given up. He'd tried to keep his position on this world so he could protect Great Britain along with the rest of the universe and its varied inhabitants, but to hell with it all. The British nation certainly wasn't worth saving. Let her leaders arrest him. These self-absorbed idiot



bureaucrats who couldn't even run a single country, they could guard the universe now. Rodney Allen Wyckham was done with saving the cosmos. But while he would not defend himself from these invaders, he was not going to surrender to the two hated foes before him.

"Mister Bubbler, it seems this gentlemen has broken the peace here in the Krag. Might I suggest you escort him outside to the usual destination after such an offence? And mayhap take his saliva-laden friend along as well?"

Kemp ceased his futile efforts to get his sword unstuck as he realized the approaching ball of mud was coming for him. He whispered in terror, "Good Lord, I'm to be taken by another foul demon! Save me, God, save your servant!"

But God didn't seem to be on Kemp's side, as Mister Bubbler rolled right into Kemp and sucked him up. Then it turned toward Jarvis. The terrified admiral started to back away, his straining red eyes almost bursting out of their sockets, begging for mercy. "Wyckham, call the damned demon off! Anything you ask! A knighthood, I swear it!" But then he tripped over a chair and fell, making an easy pickup for Bubbler. With only the two nobles' heads now visible, Bubbler rolled off and made for the door. Both the men within him kept up a petrified begging until the rolling motion bashed their heads a few times, knocking them silly, and they were quietly carried off. Hopefully they would wake up in time to avoid drowning in the city's cesspit, the site of their journey's end.

Another mudman rolled up and stopped, seemingly awaiting further developments. Two of the marines raised their big Brown Bess muskets and fired into the big ball of muck, only managing to knock away small bits of mire, which immediately jumped back into their owner, who remained motionless, trying to figure out whether getting shot by a human was an aggressive act that it should respond to.

Wyckham then approached the sergeant, turned his sword around, and offered it guard first. "Sergeant, your prisoner. Might I ask to whom I am surrendering to?"

The sergeant just stood there, not believing what he'd just witnessed, his jaw dropping almost to his tunic despite the tight chinstrap

of his bearskin hat. "Bluh...blah...Bloody Jesus!" was all he could manage in response. This from a man with the discipline to stand guard at Westminster Palace for hours, rigidly at attention, not even reacting to the ragged street urchins who would constantly taunt him. But the sight of two six-foot balls of mud rolling out the door with two lofty aristocrats inside was nothing the poor fellow's mind was prepared for. He just stood there, panting, his eyes bulging like hard-boiled eggs.

*My God, now they allow babbling lunatics in the Coldstream Guards?* Then he realized how shocked the sergeant must be. The incompetent bureaucrats leading this expedition had probably neglected to inform their troops about the planet's residents, and their first experience with a dangerous alien such as a mudman must be quite a shock. So far they'd probably encountered only timid creatures like the stickmen and had assumed all locals were incapable of standing up to British troops, just like all the other colonies Britain had carved out back on Earth. Now they'd just realized they could actually have a tough fight on their hands.

Wyckham, having seen many instances of mudmen handling problems at the Ruptured Krag in this fashion, was completely unperturbed. All he wanted to do was give up, but there was no way he could surrender to this man unless he could calm him down.

"Ah, yes, sergeant, matters can take unusual courses here. But have no fear for the health of those two gentlemen who have just left us. They will be quite well." He needed to reassure the man that all was in order and he should just accept Wyckham's surrender. "Though they will certainly need a thorough toilet before they can retake their places in this august expedition."

But the sergeant was still paralyzed in fear. A quick survey of the sergeant's detail showed a group of equally paralyzed soldiers. A dull thud sounded from the back of the squad. That jarred the sergeant out of his stupor somewhat. He shook his head slightly and turned to check on his men. "Corporal? Corporal Dennison?"

"Corporal Dennison be fainted, sergeant, sah!" a private in the back said as he stamped to attention. Sure enough, another soldier wearing corporal's stripes was sprawled face down across the private's

toes, his brilliant red coat soaking up the slimy trails that the mudman had left. So now the squad's corporal was missing in action as well. It didn't appear there was anyone in the room capable of accepting his surrender. Christ, he'd just have to take care of it himself.

"Sergeant, as a gentleman, I consider myself surrendered and under parole. I will now head up to the palace and present myself to the commander himself; I'm sure he is looking for me. Might I suggest you just take yourself and your men inside here and get yourselves some rest, and maybe a pint or two? I'm sure you've had a demanding day. Get you and your men something to eat as well; the fare here is actually quite respectable and the prices...well, believe me, you'll have no trouble with the bill. You can be assured that the servants here will...ah...take care of your every need. The room for enlisted men is just through that door."

That brought a spark to the sergeant's eyes. "By God, sir, yes...a drink! Could use a drink right now!" Forgetting the rest of his detail, he headed off alone into the common room. The rest of the detail, also accepting the offer of refreshment as an excellent idea, quickly followed him into the tavern, two of them dragging the comatose corporal along as well.

"That's it, sergeant. No need to concern yourself further with me," Wyckham called after him. "Just could you answer me one question? Who is in overall command of this operation?" Wyckham had to find out who he needed to talk to if he was to speak for the safety of his city's residents.

As the sergeant entered the next room, he responded over his shoulder. "Duke of Wellington, sah. If we found you, we were to bring you to him in that palace yonder."

*Good Lord!* Sir Arthur Wellesley, the Iron Duke himself, the hero who conquered Napoleon, was here on his world!



## 14

# THE IRON DUKE MEETS HIS MATCH

Shocked, Wyckham turned to address Cochrane, Badoin, Peel, Rawlins, and the rest of his supporters. "So the Duke of Wellington is the man at the head of this idiotic effort. I leave you now to seek him out. I don't know much about the man, but hopefully he's a reasonable man and I can talk some sense into him. Lieutenant Rawlins here will take you all somewhere safe. I suggest you make yourselves scarce for a while in the hope that rational minds prevail."

Rawlins nodded in acknowledgement of the order as Wyckham put on his uniform coat over his dressing gown and made his way outside. Columns of troops were marching up the street but paid him no mind. Before he could start up the hill, he was joined by Robert Peel, arranging his tailored civilian clothes as if for an afternoon stroll.

"I am sure your advice is well given, but may I come along?" the young member of Parliament said, looking directly in Wyckham's eye. "Lord Wellsley and I go back a long way, I can provide introduc-

tions. While I will do my utmost to be a voice of compromise today, on occasion the Duke of Wellington can be a mite headstrong.”

Wyckham nodded his approval. Wellesley had mentored Peel in his career; he and Peel were very close. Wyckham could certainly use his support today.

Then Badoin popped out of the tavern, ready for battle in a plumed hat and one of his typically ornate uniforms. “Capitaine, permeet that I go weeth you? I haf been fighteeng zee *Anglaise* all my life and may be of some ayseestonce?”

An ornately dressed French officer was not an asset to have along when trying to talk sense into a British field marshal. But before Wyckham could refuse the French captain, out came a stumbling Cochrane, his uniform a mess and his admiral’s bicorn askew, ranting something about “coming along to set that bloody mick straight.” Wyckham wasn’t sure how much the “bloody mick” would listen to Cochrane in his present state, and from what he’d heard, Cochrane had no friends left among England’s elite anyway. But he didn’t ask any of them to return to the Krag. They’d all soon get arrested anyway, and besides, Wyckham could use some good men at his side right now. The group began walking, with the wavering Cochrane barely managing to keep on station.

The city was being completely overrun. Pairs of green-uniformed skirmishers were clearing buildings, red-coated companies of marines were scampering up onto the ramparts, newly landed sailors were manning the great guns along the city walls, and columns of infantry were quick-marching up to his palace. Wyckham tried to hail several army officers, but they were all too intent on following their varied orders to arrest the target of the whole expedition. *You idiots, I’m the man you’re looking for! Captain Wyckham!* But they flew by with no acknowledgement, probably believing him to be just another navy officer ashore as an observer. Scanning the distant palace walls, Wyckham could make out some officers above the palace gate, and one was a tall, dark-haired man with a bicorn hat “fore and aft” that could be Wellington. Wyckham headed up Governor’s Street toward the palace gate along with his compatriots.

At one point he was almost trampled by a troop of cuirassiers, heavy cavalry wearing the brass chest plates that had been popularized by Napoleon’s cavalry. Along with their cuirasses, the garishly uniformed heavy cavalry wore brass helmets with horsehair crests, fur jackets rakishly draped over one shoulder, and short blue tailcoats covered in gold embroidery. They were flying through the city at a full gallop, about sixty of them, probably heading to the other side of the city to seal off the landward exits.

He wished they would just keep on going. Like most officers in Britain’s army and navy, he had a low opinion of the cavalry. Mostly young members of prominent families who had purchased their commissions, they considered themselves modern versions of medieval knights in armour. Most were obsessed with the pursuit of personal glory and could be foolishly reckless in battle. When actually on campaign, they were generally tasked with scouting enemy positions and pursuing beaten foes in relative safety, while it was the infantry and artillery that actually fought the battles. Yet they still thought themselves the bravest and toughest fighters in all Britain’s military.

Ahead of them, a colony of ants was emerging from one of the underground mazes they had built beneath the city. Without a moment’s hesitation, the cavalry rode right through them, trampling many of the surprised beings. Ants went flying everywhere, their brittle bodies already missing heads and legs from the big horses’ crushing hooves.

Wyckham desperately yelled to their commander, a lanky colonel. “Colonel, halt your dragoons, for God’s sake! Those are citizens of Freeport!” But the arrogant horsemen either didn’t hear him or simply ignored the mere navy captain who was wearing his uniform coat over a dressing gown. His troop continued to run over the poor ants, finally thundering off around the corner in a cloud of dust. As soon as the dust settled, Wyckham ran up to the sprawled bodies and recognized several of the workers who had been casting the new ceramic guns in Queen’s Favourite’s factory. Every single one had been hopelessly crushed and mangled by the big chargers; there was not even a single wounded. *Jesus*. Badoin was also stunned by the sight, and

Cochrane even came out of his drunken stupor to curse the “upper class twits” loudly.

And that wasn’t the only atrocity occurring in the city. Sporadic musketry, occasionally in sizable volleys, was echoing through the streets. City residents were clearly falling to other causes besides rampaging horses. Sadly, Wyckham had feared there would be such occurrences. British soldiers were generally ignorant rurals who had “taken the King’s shilling” and signed up in taverns, after the enlistment detail had gotten them drunk. To abruptly put them in a spaceport filled with all manner of unbelievable aliens would be far more than they were capable of dealing with. A misunderstood glance, some strange speech, the use of some alien device, or just the startling sight of some alien’s face, and their first instinct would be to pull their triggers. God knew how many friends he had lost already. He had to find Wellesley right quick and beg him to stop the butchering of the city by his skittish troops.

But getting quickly through the chaotic streets to talk some sense into the man was proving to be a very difficult proposition. Even if they didn’t get caught by a patrol and thrown into one of the ships’ brigs, or trampled by another squadron of wild cavalry, progress through the street fighting could take hours.

A commotion up the first side street attracted Wyckham’s attention. Some green-clad skirmishers came running into the intersection, abject terror on their faces, and ran into a building, clearly in a hurry to get off the street. Then the cause of it all came around the corner. It was Draeshpalone, riding one of his giant bulls, with four more of the three-horned beasts right behind.

“You go too,” the young man offered, with a sweep of his hand toward the waiting animals. “Ride cattle. We go to my village, you safe there. This village filled with new beings, very crazy. You climb on now.”

“Your offer of transportation is most timely, young man,” answered Wyckham as he gingerly swung up onto the first bull’s back. “But if possible, might we use these animals to get up to the palace? The only chance to save this city is for me to meet there with the commander of this invasion. Mayhap you could give us some quick instruction in the art of riding these beasts?”

“Riding three-horns easy. I take you to palace. Follow me.” And with that, he called out by name to his huge beasts, which walked over to be mounted by the four men, not without some difficulty. But mimicking Draeshpalone’s seat, Wyckham settled in behind the creature’s head shield and grabbed it with both hands, and the bizarre parade started up the hill at a surprisingly brisk pace. Cochrane urged his mount into a canter, Badoin rode with his nose in the air looking like Lancelot, and a nervous Peeler cautiously followed Draeshpalone on his beast.

Wyckham found his mount to be an easy and steady ride, responding to tugs on its head shield and knees in its sides, much like a horse. The four big bulls picked up speed, their tree-trunk legs giving the cobblestone streets quite a pounding, shaking the sheet-metal buildings as they went by. Any soldiers they met stared for just a moment, dropped their muskets in absolute terror, and quickly dashed away from the huge, snorting beasts.

The five of them turned the last corner onto an open plaza on Governor’s Street to see a troop of cavalry milling about in the intersection, blocking access to the palace. Wyckham’s ire seethed when he realized it was the same troop that had run down the poor ants just minutes ago. Their colonel, a flamboyant young cavalier with ornate brass helmet and cuirass polished like mirrors, saw the naval captain riding a giant alien beast and finally realized that this must be the renegade they were looking for. To his credit, he swallowed any fear of the giant bulls, smartly spun his mount to address his men, and crisply barked out orders. “The Third will form lines!” The rest of his troop, all sixty of them, pulled out either carbines from their saddles, big horse pistols from their sashes, or heavy sabers from their scabbards, and began to form up into three lines, getting ready to charge across the square.

The colonel pirouetted his impeccably groomed steed back around to face Wyckham and yelled out, “Captain Wyckham, I presume?” He drew his heavy saber upright into *prime* and trotted his mount over. “Colonel Gregory Smithson, Third Heavy Cavalry. By order of the Duke of Wellington, sir, you are under arrest for treason and graft against the Crown!”

Those accusations raised Wyckham's anger to a fever pitch. He needed to avoid arrest and get to Wellesley, not taken by some overdressed dandy. Quickly he analyzed the imminent engagement, looking for a way to give this arrogant whoreson of a colonel a quick and humiliating defeat.

In a few moments, sixty heavy horses would come charging at Wyckham in an unstoppable wave. He looked at the skittish horses across from him, which were tossing their heads around nervously from the unfamiliar smell of the monstrous bulls. *Those horses will not stand against these giant alien beasts*, he realized. Before the enemy settled its horses and finished dressing its lines, his own mounted squad could just beat them to it.

He bellowed out to the other four, "Charge these arseholes!" waved his arm at the assembling cavalry, and pressed his knees hard to his bull's flanks. The big brute put its horned head down and lunged off, heading straight for the still-forming lines of the Third Heavy, with his four compatriots charging right behind. The cavalry formation immediately broke apart, the horses panicking at the frightening sight of charging horned heads and the deafening sound of immense, thundering feet. Their riders were thoroughly bounced around, dropping firearms and sabers to the ground, as they fought with both hands to stay in their saddles.

At the head of the troop, their colonel was blocked from retreat by the bucking horses behind him, and panic swept over his face as he looked up and saw Wyckham's beast about to smash into him. Too bad for him. The huge bull crashed head on into the officer's mount, thrusting its two long horns under the horse's body and raising its head. The big charger rolled up onto the creature's large head shield and was tossed aside almost effortlessly. The screaming colonel went flying over his horse's head to slide through several piles of horse droppings while most of his troop were disappearing down various side streets.

Some became bottlenecked at the western exit from the plaza, and the rest of Wyckham's little squad caught up with them. Cochrane was calling, "Stand and fight, you bloody cowards!" as his beast flicked his

massive head left and right, pushing into the rearing horses. Badoin sat elegantly astride his beast, appearing above it all, as his bull steadily rolled horses off its head shield one by one. Draeshpalone and his beast, mimicked by a quick-learning Peeler on his mount, kept feinting at the panicked horses, moving them out of the plaza like dogs herding sheep.

After a few minutes, the cavalry had fled and the way was cleared, and the group reassembled to continue unimpeded up Governor's Street. Wyckham looked back over his shoulder at the stunned colonel sitting in the middle of the street, his fancy brass chestplate smeared with horse dung. With a doff of his hat, Wyckham yelled out, "And a tallyho to you, sir!" and nudged his mount into a smart canter toward the palace.

Governor's Street ended in a promenade right in front of the palace gates. The four petitioners dismounted a block away, left their mounts with Draeshpalone, and headed for the palace gates on foot. Wyckham walked up to the red-coated regulars on guard, acting as if he owned the place, which was an easy enactment since he felt he did, and walked right in. The new guards saluted the uniformed naval officers, who nodded back and turned left to ascend the stairs for the palace's north rampart. Gaining the firing step, they immediately saw the man they had come to see. Tall and stately, it could only be Field Marshal Sir Arthur Wellesley himself, facing north and looking through his telescope, surrounded by other officers doing the same.

"Lord Wellington, a moment, if you would?" Wyckham called out as he walked over. The field marshal didn't even look his way as a junior adjutant, a young, blond-headed lieutenant, moved over to inquire about Wyckham's business.

But Cochrane decided he wasn't waiting for any formalities. He shouted out to Wellington in a voice hoarse from alcohol, "Arthur, you pompous fool! As usual, yer mucking everything up! 'Twill end up like Bajadoz if yah don't put a stop to yer troops right now! You don't have a bloody clue about what yer doin' here!"

That got Lord Wellington's attention. In the Penninsular War of 1812, after the difficult siege of Bajadoz, which inflicted heavy losses on



the attacking British, Wellesley's troops went wild for three days, sacking the city and raping countless Spanish women. It was said to be the greatest regret that Wellesley had about the entire campaign. The field marshal angrily snapped his glass closed and turned around to face them.

There he was, the man who had finally conquered Napoleon. The famous hawkish nose, the piercing black eyes, the ever-present sneer—Europe's savior. After defeating Boney's best generals in Spain, he defeated France a second time when the emperor managed to escape exile on Elba and sent the continent back to war again. After a tremendous fight at Waterloo, Wellesley squeaked out a narrow victory, Napoleon was exiled again, and France was returned to the House of Bourbon. All this had happened after Wyckham had arrived on Draez, but *Scamp* had brought copies of the *London Times* back detailing the final battle in Belgium.

Could Wyckham get the man to disobey his orders and stop the carnage? Wellesley's reputation was that of a caring general, having wept openly more than once at the sight of British corpses on the battlefield. Wyckham would try to persuade the man to consideration for the city's peaceful occupants, but he had doubts for success. The steady crackle of musketry confirmed the violent sacking of a city, and the Duke of Wellington seemed quite at ease with the entire operation.

"Aha, Lord Dundonald," Wellington bluntly stated, using Cochrane's formal title. "Always such a recognizable voice. Only yours has that unmistakable slur first thing in the morning. Been working your right elbow all night, I'll warrant?"

That got Cochran's ire up. "Want I been doin' iz none o' yer bizness, Arthur! What iz yer bizness izzat yer so'jers iz shootin' up a peaceful town, killin' the rez'dents, when all 'ey want is commerce wit' England! Civilians! Mebee all yer shame about Bajadoz was jest a buncha malarkey? There's no battle goin' on 'ere, Arthur! Have yah not noticed there's no one shootin' at yah? And believe me, Arthur, if they did, they'd kick yer pompous arse! Christ, get control o' yer men! Yer ah shame t' the entire Irish race!"

Wellington moved up close into Cochrane's face. "Listen here, you sodden disgrace! First you join this rebellion, then, when I have to come here to clean up this mess, you have the cheek to disparage me

in front of my officers? You're damned lucky I've banned dueling in the army, because so help me I'm ready to call you out right now!"

"Oh, izzat 'ow it iz now?" replied Cochrane. "Well, bugger yer rules, Arthur! Lez settle the matter right now!" And with that, he went to draw his sword on England's greatest hero. Wyckham stepped in and grabbed Cochrane's arms before he got himself shot by Wellington's guards. "Lord Wellington, please excuse the admiral here; he's... ahh...had a rough night."

"And just who might you be?" Wellesley asked with his hands clasped behind his back as his adjutants, guards, and other staff rushed over, hands on their sword grips.

"Captain...ah...Governor Rodney Wyckham," he replied, deciding to use a more impressive title in front of a man who would surely be prime minister someday. He would have bowed and made a leg, but he was afraid to let go of Cochrane, who was still hot and trying to get a hand free to draw his sword.

The duke's face screwed up in a righteous fury. "Captain Wyckham! The man at the heart of all this rebellion! Oh, but my apologies, you're no longer a mere captain in the British Navy, you're a governor now, are you? Just borrowed a Royal Navy fleet, persuaded a thousand of the king's sailors to desert along with you, and that qualifies you as a governor?" Then he noticed Peel for the first time. "Robert. I heard you were here. You of all people." He shook his head sadly, then glanced over to Badoin, noticing the ribbon and badge of the revolution on his hat. "And who's this French peacock here?" he asked, running his eyes over Badoin's heavily decorated uniform.

"Ah, I am zee peacock, yes?" Badoin responded with a smirk. "What surprise, a rude *Anglaize*." But the smirk turned to steel as Badoin moved right up into Wellesley's face. "Bot won more eensult to me and you weel nevaire make anohtaire, zees I ayssure you."

That was the final straw for the men surrounding Wellington. Guards and fellow officers were on them, shouting and grabbing their arms, pulling them away from the field marshal. Wellington remained unfazed, not even stepping back from the commotion. One matters had quieted down, he spoke with brutal exactitude.



“Just who do you really think you are here, Wyckham? An emperor? Did you really think Great Britain would allow you to use Royal Navy ships to set up your own competing empire here? In a place filled with gold, and at the center of vast new trade routes? To be populated by all manner of filthy creatures instead of stalwart Englishmen?” He started to turn away as his men restrained Wyckham’s party. “Your game of gods is over here, gentlemen. This is now a Crown colony.”

Robert Peel, the only one not struggling, tried to reason with his long-time mentor. “Sir Arthur, wait a moment, I implore you. This is not a simple manner of another colony for England’s commercial benefit. This world must be kept away from its previous occupants, or England will be destroyed along with the entire planet of Earth. Our Captain Wyckham here has proved very effective at kicking them out and preventing their return. Please, Arthur, there is a lot about this world you need to learn. You must stop this attack and sit down with us immediately. You know me as a man dedicated to England and the empire as much as you, but there are grander issues at stake here.”

Wellington shook his head, pursing his lips in sadness. He had made up his mind about Peel, too. “Robert, I don’t know what’s bewitched you here, but your actions show you have abandoned your country. I cannot let our long friendship affect justice. You will be charged with treason the same as these other traitors.”

A large volley of musketry caused everyone present to look down into the city. Smoke was rising from the dock area, but Wyckham couldn’t make out any details. Wellington turned back, speaking to Wyckham and Cochrane.

“The various abominations here you refer to as residents will be domesticated if edible, set free in the surrounding forests if not, or shot if dangerous. For God’s sake, you two are officers sworn to the king! Not to mention the human race! Don’t you realize how important this place is to the British Empire? Instead, you want to give it to all manner of repugnant creatures?” He turned his address to Peel. “Robert, you and I are both interested in reforms for the common man, but to give untold wealth to all these animals and strange beings that I’ve seen here? I would expect such *égalité* and *fraternité* nonsense from this

ridiculous Frenchman here”—at this, Badoin struggled unsuccessfully to get at him—“but not from Englishmen. You all belong with Britain, Earth, and God’s race of human beings! Act like it!”

So much for reasoning with the man. He was a national leader, a pillar of England, and he was going to follow the king’s orders no matter what. Like the rest of the expedition, he had no understanding of this planet’s importance, nor the necessity of working with other worlds to protect the universe. British mercantilists would run this world. *God save us all.*

Wellington shook his head in final disgust and turned his back on them to continue observing his takeover of the city. Over his shoulder, he issued a final order for them. “Colonel Campbell, put them all under arrest and row them out to the luxurious accommodations of *Victory*’s brig. They will be going back to London for a court martial as soon as we can operate the transportation device.” Another crackle of musketry closer to the walls grabbed Wellington’s attention, and he strode off to get a better look.

Several guards gave the four of them a rough shove and they headed for the stairs, defeated and dejected. Just as they reached the head of the stairway, Wyckham heard all sorts of exclamations from behind. He turned back to see Wellington’s group gesturing skyward. He looked up and stopped. *Jesus, here we go again!*

Because a long line of portals had opened over the port. And it seemed that whenever these things unexpectedly appeared, major events followed, and right quick. They were high in the air, huge ones, maybe five cables square, each one big enough for a small town to pass through. Then, suddenly, huge things did begin to pass through, some gigantic blurs that flew past the town at mind-numbing speed, too fast to make out any details. The ground shook with their thunderclaps as they slowed down several miles to the south, made wide turns in the sky, and came back toward the city.

Now he could make them out—huge, gleaming ships clearly bristling with weapons. Christ, were they the Draesh fleet? If so, all was lost. Wyckham counted thirteen ships and got a good look at them as they slowed further and stationed themselves motionless above

the anchored British fleet. But, thank God, they were from the Slick navy—League of World ships! Wyckham knew the giant craft well; one of them had carried his entire squadron inside it into the battle at Hollow Mountain. But these were no transports, and they weren't flying like transports either. It was clear to Wyckham that they were warships, and they were forming position for an attack. The thirteen ships made three columns in the sky, one in the center and two perpendicular flanking positions, a textbook disposition for firing enfilade.

Then as one the ships fired their weapons, sending beams like burning columnss straight down toward the wooden ships below. The entire British fleet, with God knows how many men aboard, were about to be turned into ash. But the beams seemed to purposely miss, as each one hit the water about a hundred yards from a ship, and then circled around it. They actually burned holes in the surface, sending roaring steam clouds jetting straight up into the air. As the beams circled, waves crashed into the vacant holes, and the anchorage was suddenly as rough as the Channel in a full gale. Fifty-foot waves pounded the shoreline, shooting across the beach and crashing up against the city walls. All the small service boats along the quays were dashed to pieces, and several larger craft tied up at the docks were swamped. With all the turbulence and crashing waves, it was a scene from Armageddon—the blinding light and flaming heat from the beam weapons, the water boiling and roaring, the works of man being destroyed. It was as if Zeus himself had cast thunderbolts into the cove. The clouds of steam grew until they covered the entire fleet, whirling fiercely in the air as they were whipped by the winds from the burning beams. To Wyckham, it looked like the inside of one of James Watt's new industrial steam engines gone amok. But the violent waves were doing real damage. Even the nine ships of the line, each over two hundred feet in length, were being tossed about like toys, and several of them had dragged their anchors. Wyckham watched as *Belepheron* broke loose, narrowly missed a deadly beam, and crashed violently into *Neptune*. The impact caused both ships to lose their foretops, and *Bellerphon*'s entire foremast split and crashed forward onto *Neptune*'s poop deck. Wooden spars tangled with rope stays and the ships were grappled together,

continually crashing into each other. Fortunately, just as it looked as if both ships would be destroyed, all the beams shut off. The steam quickly blew away, the waters calmed, and the fleet in the cove started to settle down.

It had been a clear message. The fleet above could produce Armageddon on the water at will.

All the soldiers watching from the palace ramparts were absolutely stupefied with what they had just seen. The display of firepower and chaos had them pretty much paralyzed in amazement. Wyckham had to hand it to the Slicks, they had certainly put on an impressive show. Possibly now his lordship would be in a more garrulous mood?

"Sir Arthur!" Wyckham yelled. "That was a shot across your bows. I suggest you pay heed, cease hostilities, and sit down for a little chat, as your friend Peel has suggested."

But Wellesley was frozen with shock, incapable of a functional reply—hell, the field marshal couldn't put two words together. "Ahhhhh...wha?...my God..."

Wyckham's guards were likewise amazed, frozen like gargoyles on a Gothic cathedral, their minds overwhelmed, no longer paying any attention to Wyckham or the other two captives, just gaping skyward with their jaws hanging open. Well, if they were no longer going to do their jobs as proper guards, it was time to part with their company.

"Excuse me, lads, but I think the Duke needs me right now," he explained. While the guards had completely forgotten about him, with their attention glued to the cove, their hands were still clenched in panic on Wyckham. Slowly he managed to work his arms free of his guard's grasp, then peeled their hands off Cochrane, Peel, and Badoin as well. The four of them walked up to a still-motionless Duke of Wellington.

"Yes, let me give you a tour of this Slick fleet here, your lordship" Wyckham pointed out in a tutor's voice. "Those eight in the middle are their ships of the line. Probably each has five thousand crew, and I would guess upward of thirty guns. As you've just seen, their great guns shoot a continuous beam of fire. In just a moment, they can turn a wooden ship into nothing. Just one of the small, hand-held ones at the

Battle of Hollow Mountain cut through *Zeus* as if she were warm butter, sank her in less than a minute.” Wellington remained silent. Wyckham wasn’t sure the Duke was absorbing any information right now, but he continued anyway.

“But that’s just the half of what they can do. See those gunports along their bows?” He pointed out four vertical ovals along the front of the nearest ship. But Wellington didn’t seem to be properly focused on the lesson in Slick weaponry. Wyckham was getting frustrated. Christ, Wellington better snap out of his stupor and start listening if this invasion was going to be halted. “Pay attention now. Remember, you’re a field marshal, and you have to learn about these things,” he spit out. Finally, he put his right hand on the top of the Duke’s head, twisted it to look at the ships he was pointing at, and gave it a good shake.

That finally got a response from the reluctant student. “Ah...yes, yes, I see them.”

“Very good, Arthur. Well, rockets shoot out of those holes. Like Congreve’s, only much more powerful. Some are solid shot and can pierce anything. They can even puncture the steel hide of enemy ships. And they have explosive ones that could level all of London in a single blast.”

As they watched, immense hatches hinged open on all the ships’ sides, dozens of smaller flying craft popped out, and they all flew toward the palace. “Aha, your lordship, here come our visitors. Shall we meet a few?” Wyckham stepped up on the wall and waved vigorously.

Immediately the small ships halted, except for the first shuttle, which continued on until it was hovering some twenty feet above them on the north rampart. A hatch opened, dropping one of those magical unfolding stairways, and five of the tall, four-armed Slicks emerged, each holding leveled beam weapons.

Slicks were impressive when dressed for battle. While Slick civilians went about naked, which was not particularly shocking since they had no genitals or other features on their bodies, these soldiers were fully clothed in strange padded waistcoats and loose pantaloons. These had all sorts of devices belted about their bodies, and they wore metal helmets with movable monocles and short tubes that bent up to their mouths.

A commotion off to Wyckham’s right made him look over just in time. A squad of guards was forming up, about to fire their muskets at the approaching aliens. *Christ, no!* Wyckham ran in front of them, waving both arms. “Lads, listen to me, I’m the governor here! I know these fellows look a fright, but they’re allies! Do not fire upon them, or they will immediately obliterate all of you!”

The squad dropped their muzzles, thankful that an officer had commanded them not to start a fight with a clearly superior force. Wyckham rejoined Wellesley just as three Slicks walked up to him, none of whom Wyckham recognized. But the first, a particularly tall one with some unusual emblems on his waistcoat, apparently knew Wyckham. Probably he’d seen some of the thousands of electric pictures of “the Conqueror of the Draesh” that he’d heard were prevalent throughout all the local planetary systems.

“Captain Wyckham, what is happening here?” the featureless alien said through the translator strapped to its head. It looked puzzled. “Do you require assistance? Are these forces here enemies?”

“Well, now, that’s an excellent question,” he replied with a querulous look at Wellington. “What say you, Lord Wellington? See any foes about?”

The Duke turned slowly to look at Wyckham, more astonished than ever at meeting his first Slick and once again incapable of speech. “Arthur, Arthur,” Wyckham said as he put his arm around Wellington to give him another shake. “Snap out of it, old boy.” He spoke to the field marshal as if he were a child, trying to get through the man’s shock. “Yes, believe me, I understand your amazement. It is a different world up here. But you don’t have to worry about those horrid light beams; they’ve all gone bye-bye. Just do what I tell you, and everything will be fine.” *Christ, why did you all come to this place? No way can you deal with it.*

“Introductions are in order,” Wyckham continued as he turned back to address the Slick that had spoken to him. He made a bow and extended a leg. “Captain Wyckham, governor of Port Wyckham, your servant, sir. And to whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“I am Number One,” it responded.

*Good Lord, Number One?* The leader of the most powerful race in the League of Worlds had come here to help him! Previously the highest-ranking Slick official to visit had been ranked only eighteen.

"I am certainly honored to make your acquaintance. And my deepest thanks for your timely arrival. It seems a group of my fellow British have come here with the intention of taking over the place."

"Why is that? You are Wyckham, conqueror of the Draesh. They can fight Draesh better than you?" the alien asked, still trying to figure matters out.

"Well, that's not why they came, no," Wyckham answered. "They actually wanted to conquer the planet for their personal material gain, and they had planned to enslave or execute the city's existing population. This fellow here is their leader, the Duke of Wellington." He pointed at the field marshal and stepped back, just in case Number One decided to blast Sir Arthur into cinders.

The Slick leader understood everything now, and he wasn't real happy about it. Looking in Wellesley's eyes, his translator spat, "You would rule this planet, stripping its resources for yourself but ignoring its commitment to fight with the League of Worlds? Those actions violate the charter for this world. You must leave now." He looked at Wyckham. "Or we should just destroy them all?"

This whole situation was about to turn ugly. The Slicks could start shooting at any moment, unless they were thoroughly convinced that hostilities had ceased and the British fleet was heading back to Earth. For that to happen, Wellesley needed to immediately agree to terms with the Slick leader and issue the orders for his generals to start reembarking the troops. But the Duke's first encounter with a seven-foot Slick, with its glossy white skin, its featureless face, and the yellow vertical-slit eyes, had rendered Wellesley nearly comatose. Wellington just kept looking back and forth at Wyckham and Number One, his head like a clock pendulum, unable to speak. *Christ!* Wyckham needed Wellesley to wake up and get matters underway right quick. The Slick leader looked trigger happy and might start shooting any second. *Christ, say something, Wellesley, or your whole invasion force is going to get annihilated in a flash!*

"Your Lordship? Arthur?" Wyckham said as he shook him, but to no avail. Exasperated, he grabbed the duke's open jaws in both hands and stated loudly, "Speak up, your lordship. You agree, to Number One here, that you're quite sorry for all the commotion? Especially if your forces have shot any members of his race? It was all a big mistake, and you'll be leaving as soon as possible? Is that not your decision, sir?" Wyckham worked the field marshal's jaws as he spoke into his ear. "Remember how you can move your jaws and say words? Say yes, Arthur. That's a good boy, you can do it. I know it's difficult for you right now, but I'm here helping you. You can do it, Arthur, just say yes. Speak, for God's sake Arthur, say something!"

The Duke of Wellington started moving his lips a little, took a slightly deeper breath, clearly trying to say something. *Yes, Arthur, say yes!*

Finally he managed a sound. "Yah...buh...baya...ya." Apparently that was all Wyckham was going to get out of the man. *Well, that will just have to do.*

"What does he say?" asked the big Slick, still fingering a knob that was probably the trigger for his weapon. "This is affirmative?"

"Ah, yes, definitely," replied Wyckham. "'Yah bubba yah' is an old English phrase for 'absolutely, I agree.'" He turned to face Wellington's adjutant, a stocky, brown-haired man in his fifties. "Isn't that right, Colonel Campbell? As His Lordship's adjutant, you will immediately be giving orders for the troops to cease all fighting and reembark, won't you, Colonel?"

Campbell was almost as well known in England as his superior. He'd been in every battle with the Duke—all through India, the Peninsula war, and Waterloo—and had gained a reputation for smart field decisions. Most importantly, he did not seem mentally incapacitated by the Slick's show right now, unlike most of Wellington's generals, who were standing about like terrified statues. The man shot a piercing look at Wyckham, then solemnly surveyed the threat in the sky above. He appeared to come to a decision.

"Oh, yes, when His Lordship says, 'Ya bubba yah,' you'd better get moving right quick," stated the wise Scotsman to the Slick leader.

“That absolutely was His Lordship agreeing to stop the invasion and head home immediately. My apologies. I wish there were time for formal introductions, but I think it best if I immediately start getting the troops back to their ships.”

He bowed, then spun to some dismounted riders waiting nearby. “Couriers to me!” he yelled, and then bent over his field desk to start furiously scribbling orders. One by one, the line of corporals picked up orders and sped down the stairs to tethered horses, and soon a score of mounted men were galloping off through the city, the clattering of their horses’ hooves on the stone streets echoing down the streets. Within a few minutes, all gunfire had ceased.

The watching Slicks raised their weapons and fiddled with them, probably taking them off cock. Wyckham took a deep breath. Countless lives in his city had just been saved, and beings throughout the cosmos concerned with their future could breathe easier.

While all this was going on, Wyckham noticed a procession of glowing lights emerging from the transporter cave and heading directly toward them. Clearly it had been the Fireflies that had saved the day. They had disappeared only to get into the transport control room and bring in the Slick fleet.

Wyckham addressed the Slick leader. “Sir One, my deepest thanks for your assistance here. Without your arrival, there would have been untold—”

Number One interrupted him. “Your own British have forced us to violate most important rule of League charter—weapons ban on Draez. Rest of League laugh at us. Don’t make us come here again, Wyckham. If your countrymen are foolish, do not bring them here. Now we leave.” With that, he headed up the magical stairway with his guards. The contraption folded itself up and slid into its spacecraft, and the shuttle moved off with a burst of fire from its stern and a steady roar.

The floating balls of light settled over the ramparts, and then they changed into the alien Lady Brashton and some attendants, looking ravishing in ball gowns despite having just saved the day. The four men left on the north wall couldn’t help but shake their heads at the mysterious energy beings. It was clear to them who really ruled this planet.

“The fight must finally be over. Our lady friends are dressed for festivities,” Cochrane snickered to Wyckham as he walked over.

“Yes, we are,” commented the head Firefly as Lady Brashton. She gently alighted next to the four men. “After Mister Crawford helped us to open the portals, he informed us of your tradition of experiencing novel physical activity after such a world-saving victory, and ball gowns were his suggestion.”

Wyckham would just pretend he hadn’t heard that. Brilliant as they were, they made the mistake of believing Gunner Crawford’s explanation of proper social mores. The man was not the pillar of nineteenth century virtue one should rely on for guidance on the subject. God knows what he had been doing in that cavern with the Fireflies after the transporter was fixed.

Crawford was used by the Fireflies to actually operate the transporter, since the Fireflies were only electrical images and could not move any mechanical controls. But like any human, they had also him used to placate their own needs, and he was known for asking them to take the images of the Queen of England and her court in a royal orgy. Unfortunately, other sailors often witnessed these sessions, and eventually tales of Ordinary Seaman Crawford rutting madly with Queen Carolynne on the floor of a cave made its way not only through Port Wyckham but back to Earth. While Wyckham had not been present to witness the famous incident, horrible images of how the corpulent queen would have looked, thrashing about on the ground with Crawford, still lurked in the recesses of his mind. God knows what he’d told them about “victory traditions”.

The Crown, of course, had been furious over the tales which had leaked back to London of a common seaman having sex with an effigy of the queen. Despite George III’s efforts to keep his slovenly wife out of the public eye, she had developed a reputation for promiscuity, especially with her servants. Commoners all over Britain loved her for it, so her image had been forefront in Crawford’s mind, and the Fireflies had used it. The word of Crawford’s session with an effigy of the queen was now common knowledge in every tavern in England. Most likely George III would throw Crawford in the Tower forever if he got the chance, and Wyckham along with him.



“Well, I certainly hoped you didn’t play the queen this time. At least I hope my devoted Lady Brashton didn’t?” he asked her. *But why did I ask her that?* He realized he didn’t want her to answer.

Damned if she didn’t raise an eyebrow and give him the most inviting stare. “The battle is over. Isn’t it a time to celebrate, and aren’t ball gowns for celebrating?”

“Madam, once again you’ve got the right of it. Isn’t King George himself awaiting us here in his coach? Can’t go to the ball without us? Well, probably not, so a few hours at the Krag will just have to do.”

The Firefly took his extended arm, and they headed down the stairs to find Draeshpalone waiting with his mount. “Not a proper coach, but it will have to do,” japed Wyckham. As they rode off, he looked back over his shoulder to see a still-paralyzed Wellesley, looking out over the palace walls, his mouth continuing to babble like an infant’s.



## 15

### ADMIRAL AND GOVERNOR

The next day found Wyckham back at his table in the Ruptured Krag, along with Lieutenant Rawlins and Capitaine Badoin. The three were art critics today, examining a large oil painting on the wall next to his table that the artist Goya had done before he left. After the lifting of Port Wyckham’s siege weeks ago, the painter had the victors pose along the docks beside a dead Draesh hanging from a yardarm, and he had produced one of his giant frescoes to commemorate the victory.

“Eet eez not a mastairepiece, but zey only come from Fronce, as you know,” Badoin spoke in his usual pontificating tone. “But for ay Espanaird, eet eez not bad.”

“The modern David and Goliath,” commented Rawlins. “Proof that the meek shall inherit Freeport as well.”

“The meek better keep some thirty-two-pounders handy if they want to inherit anything on this world,” noted Wyckham. But his chest did swell a bit as he appreciated the fine work Goya had produced. It showed Wyckham standing in front of *Righteous* and a Dreash corpse with two large holes in its chest, compliments of of Harrison’s guns.



Various aliens from the battle were standing around, but Goya had made Wyckham stand out in the painting. As the governor of the entire planet should, of course.

All around them, the Krag was having an especially busy day. Word had traveled through all the galaxies that Port Wyckham was open for business again, and all sorts of alien captains on newly arrived spacecraft were once more working the room, looking for buyers for their exotic cargos or just fishing for information about trading opportunities in newly accessible systems.

He watched a meeting between one of the resident vine people speaking to a man-shape that was actually a colony of swarming insects. They both had translator devices and were speaking aloud in English, now the language of trade on Draez.

"Final offer. Twenty-two barrels of catalyst for four land drills. If unacceptable, you can all go buzz up a tree." Freeport had many valuable raw materials, one of which was an important catalyst in spaceship fuel. The insect's planetary system was a source of very high-quality mining tools. Like two Arabs in a Moroccan souk, they continued haggling and issuing insulting ultimatums. Wyckham's gaze continued across the room.

Sitting at a table in a dark corner, Wyckham noticed a being new to him. It was mostly a big bird, tall as a man, with a horrid head covered in wrinkled red skin, and with a stained hooked beak. Most surprisingly, it had two humanlike arms as well as wings on its back.

But the things were certainly no angels. Wyckham had heard about these "buzzard men." They were said to be intergalactic scavengers, always with a nose for the latest war and the bargains available from desperate and vulnerable refugees. Well, the creature certainly looked like an ugly African vulture. And this damned thing was in deep discussion with one of the "highwaysnakes," the nasty serpent-men whom Wyckham believed were providing intelligence to the Draesh. Seeing them plotting God knows what right in front of him really rubbed Wyckham's craw. He wanted to just call over two mudmen and have them suffocate the pair, but he made the more diplomatic decision to have some Fireflies keep an eye on them. *You're the governor of a civilized city, Wyckham, not Blackbeard the Pirate ruling lawless Tortuga. Act like it.*

One of the octopus-like creatures slithered over on its eight spiraling legs. These primarily aquatic beings stood about eight hands high, were deep blue in colour, and had big black eyes. They looked pretty much like regular deep-sea octopi, except that they could walk upright and had lungs as well as gills. This fellow, whose name translated to the Big Pumper, managed a school of them that had been building underwater foundations for new stone quays along the beach. Wyckham was glad to see him back. They had all swum out to sea when the British fleet attacked, and all work on the docks had ceased. Hopefully, the project could now get back underway.

Wyckham stood to receive the creature. "Mister Pumper, you're a welcome sight. Have all your workers returned? I've got ships full of building materials we need for the city's repair stacked up in the sky, waiting for a place to unload."

"All back working now," the fish man rasped through his translator. "Good that Slicks scare shite out of your old bosses so they leave. All bosses bad, but I see your bosses, your bosses really bad. Worse than rotten anchovies."

"Regrettably, sir, I cannot dispute a word of your well-phrased statement," Wyckham acknowledged. "My apologies for my fellow British. I hope you did not lose any of your species to my trigger-happy brethren?"

"Two wounded, but Slicks fix with mechanical legs. Now back to work. We get caught up in three days," he replied.

"Good news, that. Be assured that this planet is secure and a safe place to work. There will be no more attacks from my home planet, that I can assure you." Wyckham had banned trips to Earth. No portal would ever open there again. British politics would be restricted to cocking up Earth.

He leaned back and sipped his wine as the octopus slithered out the door. Thank God the rulers of England were out of his life. They had demonstrated again why Wyckham would never return home. England's contact with Freeport should have been the most important event in British history, yet his country had treated this planet as if it were just another island to colonize and exploit. Despite having

national leaders from Parliament, the Church of England, Lloyd's Bank, and many leaders of commerce, the group had never taken a serious philosophical look at Draez and all its implications for mankind. Earth should have sent the descendants of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle to study the alien civilizations, but the bunch of Tories they sent could only philosophize about the concept of personal profit. For now, Rodney Alan Wyckham could trust only himself to run this planet fairly and keep the Draesh out.

But he did really miss Cochrane. That man sailed through life on the same course that Wyckham had chosen—fight the good fights, take good care of those at your side, protect and learn from civilians. And while you're doing all that, you enjoy life during the breaks.

Clearly this world was going to see more fighting, and it would've been handy to have Cochrane around. The admiral wasn't just a mad dog in a scrap, he was a brilliant tactician on the field. And the troops loved him; men would follow him against impossible odds. Those battlefield stunts he had pulled with the Draesh's body and the burrowing ants were conceived and executed perfectly, right in the middle of desperate fights. And more than that, he was a savvy diplomat. Soon after arriving, he had learned the importance of the issues at stake here for all beings, and had wisely decided to ignore his own orders and keep Britain out of things, whatever the consequences to him personally. And of course he had been constantly entertaining.

But he had begged off on Wyckham's invitation to stay, even the last one given at the docks as Cochrane prepared to leave. "Ah, my good friend, I would love to stay longer, but I have a commitment back on Earth. The rebels in Chile have asked for my aid in throwing off the Spanish yoke. I'm going back to board a frigate I've commissioned at Portsmouth and cross the Atlantic to meet with the rebellion's leaders. All they want is for me to build them a navy and kick some five thousand Spaniards out of Port Santiago. Shouldn't be all that difficult.

"So sadly, I suspect you and I will never see each other again. With the problems *Scamp* brought back for you and your Slick allies, you'd be daft to keep any further contact with Earth. But I leave knowing this place and the fate of all worlds is in good hands." With that, he had

been rowed out to HMS *Victory* and sent off through a portal, along with the rest of the British expedition.

He would also miss Robert Peel somewhat, though the man's zealous devotion to the British Empire had made for some bitter arguments. But Peel was a strong advocate for representative government; clearly he was intrigued by what the Americans were doing, and he had learned more from his adventure here on Freeport. Wyckham had wished him well when he left. Hopefully, he would ascend to a position of power in the British government and institute the reforms he frequently spoke of, such as factory safety for industrial workers and the establishment of well-trained and honest city police companies. He might have to make it all the way to Downing Street to get real reform past the likes of the other rigid aristocrats he'd arrived with. *Probably never happen*, thought Wyckham. He was too good a man to be chosen prime minister by all the inbred imbeciles in Parliament and Westminster.

Weeks after they left, sitting at his table once again in the ruptured Krag, he mused over the British invasion that had come and gone so quickly. Wyckham had been forceful in the departure arrangements. He'd given the invasion force six hours to get everyone back aboard their ships, threatening to "call back those tall shiny fellows," and that had inspired real haste by Wellesley's officers. Wyckham had given them a short time so that they would have to leave much behind, especially horses. He was forming a cavalry squadron for patrol duties and was now the proud owner of a beautiful roan stallion, which he frequently rode about town.

The troops' departure had not gone amicably. During the attack, British officers had looked the other way as their soldiers sacked homes and looted warehouses, taking anything they wanted at gunpoint from the locals, especially gold. Outraged as soon as he heard of this, Wyckham had posted his own men along the docks along with every mudman he could summon. All the embarking soldiers were checked for stolen property before they were permitted into their boats. Any argument was quickly settled by a mudman absorbing the troublemaker, expelling any contraband, and then giving the terrified

man a rough ride to the end of the quay and spitting him into the water.

Wyckham had particularly enjoyed watching the occasional officer get this treatment. Sadly, he had missed seeing his battlefield acquaintance, Colonel of the Third Heavy Gregory Smithson, when he tried to sneak out with his horse weighted down with loot. Gunner Crawford had seen the incident and related it to his captain a few hours later, putting Wyckham in stitches.

"Some 'ands f'um *Righteous* 'r watchin' fer loot at th' docks, n' oop prances this 'ere cav'ry off'ser, actin' like King Art'er n' all, buts 'ees covered 'n 'orse shite. Th' lads seez 'iz saddlebags r' th' size o' sheep. When 'ey starts t' 'av a look, he clouts 'em wif 'is ridin' crop, yellin' 'bout 'com'ners knowin' 'ere betters' 'n such. Sose th' lads throws 'em 'ed firs' inter a mudman, 'n 'ee near chokes a'for th' mudman shats 'em inter th' bay. Then 'iz 'evy ches'plate begins 't sink 'em, buts lucky fer 'em don' a fren'ly whale come by 'n noses 'em oop t' th' beach." Wyckham suspected Colonel Gregory Smithson would be reconsidering his career in the cavalry.

At the end of the six hours he had allotted for departure, Wyckham had sent squads of marines from both *Righteous* and *Leviathan* through the streets, digging out those indisposed by drink or trying to jump ship and stay. A few blocks from where the *cuirassiers* had trampled so many ants, his marines found over a dozen horses wandering about, with no sign of their riders. But muffled human screams could be heard drifting up from deep below, coming out of the nearby anthills. Wyckham suspected there were some of the Third Heavy Cavalry missing when the final counts were taken by the departing fleet.

All the departing sailors, especially those attempting to jump ship, were sent to the docks, where bosuns there had been instructed to sign up any trained good seamen they recognized. The Battle of Port Wyckham, as it had already been named, had shown Wyckham the danger that still existed for his world. There was still a Draesh presence in the interior of the planet, and the vengeful monstrosities would work tirelessly to bring in weapons and take back their world. He needed men to crew his new ships, which were needed to patrol the planet's waterways and defend the growing city from further attack.

With the *Trinidad*, *Indomptable*, and *Cornelie* fully repaired, he had a seven-ship navy and needed another two thousand crewmen to man it. His bosuns, having served aboard many other ships in the Royal Navy, knew many of the men in the invasion force and had been instructed to persuade the best ones to stay.

While Wyckham had prohibited any impressment, the bosuns had been able to voluntarily sign up almost all the men he needed. He suspected that the allures of the Ruptured Krag and the town's other taverns, described by the recruiting bosuns in enthusiastic detail, were the main inducements for the men to decide on staying. He had listened to one bosun calling out like a carnival barker. "Ere on Draez, ye gits all th' gold n' doxies a man kin want! Stay 'ere 'n sign up wif' Dickem Wyckham! 'Ee'l personally interdoose ye t' 'iz favr'rit wenches!"

With a pitch like that, very few had refused. The British captains in the expelled fleet were quite irate over losing so many of their best crew, but Wyckham didn't give their complaints a moment's consideration. Protecting the universe was more important than protecting England's empire, and he needed crewmen for his ships.

With work proceeding to fortify the city further and to get the three new vessels ship-shape, Wyckham was confident about the future. With his new munitions, a sizeable squadron, and more than three hundred guns protecting the city, he need fear no uprising from the foes hiding out in the planet's interior. And governing the city had turned out to be fairly easy, since all the alien races were members of the League of Worlds and were used to dealing with one another. Thank God all the British delegation were gone—managing a city filled with those maneuvering nobles would have been more than he could have handled.

Now that the British threat to the planet was gone, trade and tourism had even surpassed the high levels from before the two attacks on the city. Wyckham, with a sense of history from his education at Haversham, now looked forward to his world starting a golden age for the cosmos. It would be a meeting place for every planet's best minds in commerce, science, medicine, and philosophy, similar to eleventh-century Spain under the Moors, or fourteenth-century Sicily

under the Normans. A place where peace was guaranteed, refugees from violence were welcome, and daily life was a model of progressive civilization and culture.

The Firefly Lady Brashton, dressed in a country frock, was making her way rapidly to his table. He had not seen much of her after the British left. She always seemed to have worlds to visit and matters to arrange; currently, she was assuring the bigger trading worlds that Freeport was perfectly safe and secure again. But she was back now—and hopefully, had some free time for a liaison or two with Wyckham?

Because, despite the plentiful and very forward Fireflies in all the taverns, Wyckham especially enjoyed his time with her. Part of the attraction was the mystery about her. He suspected that she was one of the most influential and potent beings in the cosmos. With the new power from all the “life-force” that she and her race had harvested from hundreds of eager sailors in her tavern, no one really knew what she and her race were now capable of.

But she was also a vast storehouse of information about other worlds—their cultures, science, and history. And that made her a fascinating conversationalist. Her explanations of electricity, parallel worlds, sound waves, even the giant power inherent in tiny quantities of matter, were all impossible subjects for Wyckham to fully understand but engrossing nevertheless. He looked forward to their discussions as much as their amorous encounters. Though as he surveyed the stunning figure approaching, dressed in a suggestive gown and sporting the large breasts that she usually wore in the Krag, right now seemed like an excellent time for a little *amour*—forget interesting discussions for now.

However, that was not to be. Much to his surprise, the Firefly Lady Brashton image displayed a visage that, for the first time Wyckham had ever witnessed, was quite an angry one. Knowing that she had carefully studied his memories of Tracy Brashton, Wyckham suspected he knew the first three words that were about to come out of her mouth.

“We must talk!” she spat out. *Well, Wyckham, you had that right.*

“Your servant as always, madam,” Wyckham said as he stood and offered her a chair. The Firefly flew into the chair without moving her

legs, like some kind of flying witch. Clearly she was so upset that she’d forgotten to move her image in a physically believable way.

“That petulant childhood love of yours is going to ruin everything!” she continued in a fury. “Why, she’s right here in my tavern now, seeing how I run things! She’ll be damaging our most important resource—humans! You must make her stop!”

“Madam, if you wish me to take some action against any being in Port Wyckham, you will need to explain their crime,” Wyckham responded. “Exactly what legal improprieties is the Baroness Kemp committing?” While no laws had been written yet for Port Wyckham, Fireflies had examined the records in so many human minds that they had a pretty good understanding of English law.

“The impertinent woman has opened up a competing tavern! She’s staffed it with actual physical females, human and alien, and is assuring my customers that an interlude with ‘real living females, your choice of species,’ far surpasses any magic we Fireflies conjure up here at the Krag! Your foolish sailors have to pay in gold for the services. Then, to get the seed from her, we have to give her all sorts of favours and assistance!”

Well, this was news. Just as the fleet was leaving, Kemp had sent him a message from HMS *Victory* stating that his wife was missing, begging Wyckham to delay the fleet’s departure until he could find her. But since Wyckham’s last meeting with Baron Kemp had ended with the man trying to kill him, he laughed and dismissed the request out of hand, assuming his wife would turn up on one of the other ships once they got back to England.

But now it seemed that Tracy Brashton had left her husband, stayed behind on Freeport, and set up her own brothel! Good lord, it never ceased to amaze him how the mighty could fall from the pinnacle of propriety to the lowest life possible. The most marriageable girl in Cornwall had ended up on another planet, running a business that involved physical relations with not just common sailors but octopi, stickmen, blind gorillas, and all sorts of beings that her peers would consider wild animals. And by threatening the Fireflies’ previous monopoly on spermatozoa collection, she was making an enemy of possibly the most powerful force in the universe.

Just as he opened his mouth to explain to the Firefly leader that all peaceful commerce in Port Wyckham was unrestricted, there was a commotion at the officers' room entrance. Wyckham looked over to see a red padded sofa being carried along by four stickmen, who had been ridiculously decorated with feathers from the planet's red pelicans. And who were they carrying in the improvised litter but Tracy Brashton herself!

Wyckham could barely recognize her. Her hair was piled up like a French courtesan's, and her face was covered in rouge and fake dimples. But most astonishing was that the previously flat-chested Tracy Brashton now sported poonts the size of Mediterranean melons! Her bodice was low and tightly laced, pushing them up almost to her chin! Wyckham couldn't take his eyes off her as she elegantly descended from her sofa like an Egyptian queen and then momentarily posed to show off her costume. She was wearing a silver satin skirt over a red velvet one, both utilizing some unseen struts to open wide at the waist and hang down her sides. The effect was that of a theater stage with its curtains held open, revealing the star of the show, her shapely legs in pink stockings. After a moment, the show ended, and she sat down in the chair to Wyckham's right, her immense breasts jiggling like big bowls of pudding.

"Dearest Rodney," she said, cooing like a big cat, all eyes for Wyckham, "as always, how good to see you. But why do you spend all your time here in this two-shilling gin mill? Haven't you heard about the club I've opened? It's what the city needs—a place for the better sorts. I have christened it the La Palace Tracee. Has a nice French ring to it, don't you think?" She leaned over to whisper in his ear, her décolletage rubbing up against Wyckham. "And let me assure you, what goes on there puts the Place Pigalle to shame!"

Wyckham couldn't believe it. The Baroness Kemp taking pride in running a scandalous brothel! He might have to visit Earth just to tell Kemp about it in person. Maybe commission a portrait of her, seated in her club in this preposterous outfit, for presentation to the baron? *Stop daydreaming, Wyckham!* He tried to come up with an appropriate comment on the situation but had trouble removing his eyes from Tracy's chest. Good lord, how does she walk with those things?

"Remind you of the hills about Cornwall?" Tracy asked, noticing where Wyckham's attention was fixed. To assist Wyckham in his investigations, she arched her back and pushed her breasts forward like the prows of two racing ships. "Yes, your handsome Slick friends were very accommodating. Didn't take but a few minutes of their amazing surgery to work these up." So Tracy had already gotten the Slicks under her thumb. Wyckham had no idea what she could have done for them in return, but clearly the city had a new power broker.

"Made them nice and light, they did," she continued, "and they're even attached to tendons, so I can move them as I like. Would you like a closer perusal?" With that, she pulled down her bodice, and her breasts thrust out at Wyckham, bobbing and reaching out toward him as if they had a mind of their own! His immediate reaction was to lean away in fear—who knows what these two strange creatures were about to do to him? Good Lord, they were writhing about like the snakes in Medusa's hair! But Tracy leaned toward him farther and brought the frightening orbs even closer! "For God's sake, Rodney, what are you afraid of? Give them a good squeeze! You have certainly always wanted to."

All this had the Firefly beside herself with anger. She stood up and bent over to yell in Wyckham's ear. "This is all it takes for her to win you to her side? Well, those are nothing!" And with that, damned if her breasts didn't swell up to the size of ale barrels! The damned things grew so fast that they spilled over the top of her frock, pushing Wyckham off his chair, and he landed on the floor in a heap.

Baroness Kemp, objecting to her younger image's breast attack on Wyckham, stood up as well, glaring in fury at the Firefly but unsure how she could attack her enemy, having failed to do her any harm twice before.

Well, mayhap it would be a while before Freeport was a perfectly peaceful world. And even longer before it would be the cultural pinnacle of the universe.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vince Scully is a retired class clown, fencer, engineer, drag racer, furniture designer, and sales rep who lives in Long Beach, California, with his wonderful wife and two dogs. With his two children out of the nest, he spends his time writing, staying in shape, and tinkering with his treasured cars, a '32 Ford and a '31 Lincoln. He often pretends to be Dodger announcer Vin Scully in order to get better reservations at restaurants. His friends describe him as indescribable. This is his second novel.

